

BECOMING WOTAN: A PREPARATORY GUIDE FOR THE ROLE OF WOTAN IN
DAS RHEINGOLD FROM RICHARD WAGNER'S *DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN*

BY
CODY MEDINA

Submitted to the faculty of the
Jacobs School of Music in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Music,
Indiana University,
December, 2013

Accepted by the faculty of the Jacobs School of Music,
Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Music.

Timothy Noble, Chairperson, Research Director

Patricia Havranek

Ayana Smith

Carol Vaness

Copyright © 2013
Cody Medina

This document is dedicated to all of those countless people who have not only fostered my love for Wagner's music, but who have helped me become the artist, musician and person I am.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so very many people who have helped me on this journey. Among this myriad are my wife Lindsay, my daughters Harper and Anne Marie, my parents Vick and Kris, my brother Casey, my dear friend and first voice teacher Ken Cox, my friends and mentors Larry Glenn, Judy Christin, Sara Bardill, Marilyn Keiser, Tomer Zvulun, Arthur Fagen, and Davis Hart, my inspirational committee Tim Noble, Carol Vaness, Patricia Havranek, and Ayana Smith, and the many others who, while not named here, have contributed in such a very profound way to my development, scholarship and artistry. You have all influenced me more than I could ever hope to express, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER 1 TIPS FOR DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO TACKLE THE ROLE OF WOTAN	1
CHAPTER 2 A CUT ABOVE THE REST: WHAT MAKES THIS GUIDE UNIQUE	19
CHAPTER 3 EDDIC POETRY, MYTHOLOGICAL ICELANDIC SAGAS AND GERMAN LEGENDS: WOTAN’S LITERARY BEGINNINGS	27
CHAPTER 4 HISTORICAL CONTEXTS: SETTING THE STAGE FOR WAGNER’S MAGNUM OPUS	46
CHAPTER 5 THE MUSIC AND DRAMA: WHAT WAGNER <i>REALLY</i> INTENDED AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79

CHAPTER 1

TIPS FOR DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO TACKLE THE ROLE OF WOTAN

When considering some of Western history's greatest large-scale works of art, one thinks of Michelangelo Buonarroti's Sistene Chapel ceiling, Filippo Brunelleschi's Duomo in Florence, Gustave Eiffel's tower in Paris, Jackson Pollack's *Mural*, Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The fact that a musical drama may share a place in the same breath as fine examples of visual art and architecture speaks volumes about the impact this cycle has had upon humanity and about its significance in both artistic and social history. It is paramount that any singer who wishes to portray a character within this drama—especially one of such magnitude as Wotan in *Das Rheingold*—should go into such an endeavor with as much comprehensive knowledge as possible. Only then can that person fully determine if he is vocally equipped and ready to perform the role at the highest artistic level.

The most important consideration any singer should weigh when approaching the role of Wotan is that of proper technique. Should a singer possess any problems that lead to vocal strain and/or pain, quick vocal fatigue, a lack of ability to produce an even-sounding voice throughout all ranges, an inconsistent vibrato, or any other such abnormalities, he should not be learning this role at this time. It is great to do research and to delve into the history, dramatic considerations, etc., of the piece to feed one's interest. However, it is not a wise choice to begin (or continue) work on this role until the

vocal technique is solidified in a way that encourages healthy production. This guide is written with the assumption that the reader is equipped with an advanced technique.

When many people who either do not know a good deal about Wagnerian conventions or who simply do not enjoy Wagner's music are confronted with the subject of Wagnerian singing, one of the immediate responses is, "Oh, I don't think that screaming over an orchestra for that long is good for the voice or really even that musical."¹ This is a common misconception. Yes, his pieces require a much larger voice than earlier operas by such composers as Monteverdi, Handel and Mozart. The orchestras are larger and are equipped with more brass and percussion instruments. The houses in which they are performed are oftentimes larger in square footage and have a wider proscenium. The operas lend themselves to over-singing due to the sheer power behind the drama and the music. These factors do not, however, necessitate any screaming (which can be defined as over-singing, possibly with a raised larynx) on the part of the singers. If a singer is screaming, he or she is plainly approaching it incorrectly. As any advanced singer, teacher, coach, director or conductor knows, as soon as the singer gets "off the voice" (lack of breath support, absence of core and energized sound, inconsistent vibrato, etc.) and begins this process of screaming, the payoff is greatly diminished and he becomes completely lost in the orchestration.

¹ On a personal note, I have actually been faced with many similar comments to this when having informal conversations with people about favorite genres of music, operas, composers, etc. The "perpetrators" of these comments made them with such vehement conviction that they actually caused the conversation to stop. I don't expect any of these people to actually read this guide, should it fall into their hands. However, I believe that the information found within its pages will ultimately prove that there is so much more to Wagner's music than "screaming" for hours on end. At least, this is the case if his music is performed well and as he originally intended.

The ability to sing with a proper technique will ensure a successful presentation. Anyone who has this kind of grasp of his technique should also be intelligent enough to discern whether or not he can produce the volume required to sing the role, which is the second most important consideration. If you cannot be heard over the instrumental forces, then don't approach this role. Some individuals have a difficult time accepting this, and for those people, I recommend finding a teacher, coach or colleague who absolutely knows what is needed for this repertoire and who can be trusted to give an honest, accurate evaluation. It is far better to hear it from someone who cares about the singer's instrument and career than from employers and critics who will "take no prisoners" when it comes to berating performances and/or ensuring the singer is not re-hired for any other performances—even if they are better suited to other roles in the future.

An equally important consideration that is directly related to technique is stamina, both vocal and physical. The need for great vocal stamina is obvious when one looks at the score and hears the great recordings. The range is large, the tessitura is challenging, and the intervals are often that of a sixth or more. The first music Wotan sings, save the brief waking up section, is the best example of this observation. Comprised of a tessitura that lies directly in the *passaggio*, this arietta-like passage ends with a descending octave to the middle voice, followed by an immediate ascending tenth that lands on a repeated and sustained note in the upper register, then a descent of that same tenth, and a final ascending *arpeggio*, which places the singer back in the *passaggio primo*. Even though

the tempo is moderate, this ending sequence occurs very quickly and over the span of a mere three-measure duration.²

The role of Wotan also demands a great deal of dynamic variation and even more variation of vocal color, both of which can become quite taxing, but should not when the breath is not employed effectively. For example, when Wotan first wakes in the passage described above, he must portray all of the characteristics of a person being awakened from a deep sleep.³ One would achieve this through a more *cupola*-enriched sound and a bit of a slow and lethargic approach to matters of diction. Conversely, when he is made aware of the completion of Valhalla mere moments later, he must immediately change to that of a person who has finally seen the payoff of toil, tribulation and patience.⁴ This would call for a much brighter, more aggressive sound that is enriched by a strict adherence to the triumphant dotted rhythms Wagner wrote. All of these factors make it absolutely paramount that the singer has an incredible sense of stamina so as to avoid injury and a subpar product.

From a purely physical standpoint, Wotan is onstage for the majority of the opera, whether or not the character is doing a good deal of singing. This means that the singer is going to be on his feet for a long time, holding a spear and wearing an eye patch. Many performers don't immediately consider this to be as important as their singing technique. However, they will find that the physical strain and exhaustion brought about by standing

² Wagner, Richard. *Das Rheingold*, *WWV 86 A*. Piano-vocal score based on the complete edition (Mainz: Schott, 2010), 89.

³ Wagner, 86-87.

⁴ Wagner, 87-89.

still for two hours will directly affect their technique and that they will need to make necessary adjustments to counteract it.

Once the singer has determined that he is adequately able vocally and physically, he must then decide if he can measure up to the dramatic demands of the role. Despite what is currently being presented during the majority of a certain opera company's high definition broadcasts; artistic performances that are fueled through more and more focused dramatic impetuses are now not only being expected, but demanded. The days of the "park and bark" production are disappearing ever further into the distant past. The use of multimedia elements and mechanistic set designs are forcing the singers to become increasingly adept actors, lest they fade into the background and merely provide backup music for the machines. Therefore, it is more important now than ever to expand and hone one's acting skills.

The following three sections are designed with the express purpose of providing the singer with exercises to not only determine whether or not he is ready and able to tackle this role, but to also prepare him if he *is*, in fact, ready to perform it. It is divided into three sections—vocal, physical, and dramatic—with exercises that are designed to guide him through the discernment and preparation processes. Some of these exercises (especially the physical and dramatic ones) are beneficial to every singer, despite his or her technical level. They are not restricted to Wagner's music and can help shape and create any character. Some are much more suited to male characters, but the reader can discern that for him- or herself.

The point of these exercises is to challenge the performer to grow and to (hopefully) begin to look at every role in a different way. This is the only way that new

and exciting stories are created through operas that have been performed hundreds or even thousands of times. Wagner's operas are no different. Many people find them boring because they equate them to fat people standing on a stage, hollering at the audience and pointing spears at people. However, when the singer really strives to add a stronger dramatic element to his character, the show suddenly becomes a potentially life-altering experience. This is art and is exactly what Wagner intended.

I suggest that the performer who is discerning whether or not to sing this role work through these exercises in order (save those in the dramatic exercises section), not moving forward until each one is performed proficiently. This may seem overly systematic and downright boring. Well, it is. Birgit Nilsson once said in an interview that eastern Europeans are best suited to sing Wagner's music because they are such methodical and efficient people, which is, in her opinion, the best way to approach his music. Therefore, the singer reading this guide should follow that same advice.

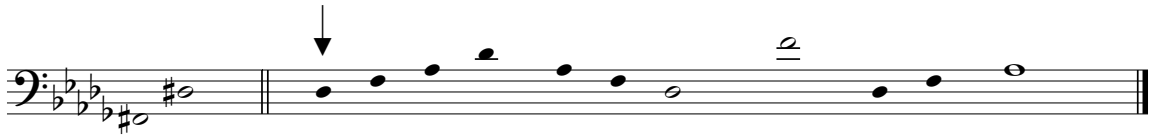
Conversely, the singer who is ready to sing this role can begin with any section he chooses, as is the case for those who don't necessarily want to sing this role but want to further hone their character building skills. I still recommend that the exercises within each section are performed in that order (save those in the dramatic exercises section), but it doesn't matter at this point in his vocal development if he begins with the dramatic or physical sections. The main point of these exercises is for the singer to feel much better prepared after doing them.

VOCAL EXERCISES

First, a singer must determine whether or not his instrument is up to the task of performing this role. While it isn't as heavy or as long as the Wotan of *Die Walküre* or Der Wanderer of *Siegfried*, the *Das Rheingold* Wotan requires true *bel canto* style singing—but over an orchestra of nearly one hundred players. It is also a role that is comprised of unending legato lines and just as many combinations of large ascending and descending leaps (many of which aren't consonant). This need for long lines and agility is what makes Wotan a specialty role.

Certain voices are comfortable singing this role in a healthy and successful fashion; many are not. Through the course of these exercises, the singer will be able to determine whether or not his voice is suited to it. This is not a musicality test, nor should these exercises be held up as an absolute assessment to determine whether or not the singer should approach *any* of Wagner's music (aside from those that help determine the size of the instrument and its ability to project over the instrumental forces). Rather, these exercises are tailored specifically to determine if a voice is a good fit for the *Das Rheingold* Wotan. Also, it must be said that every exercise must be done with an extreme sense of *legato*, or they will lose all effectiveness.

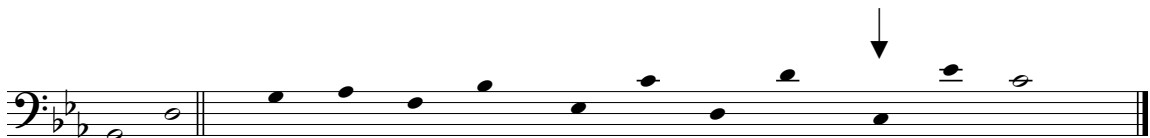
Exercise 1



In this exercise, the singer should choose a variety of vowels, as well as a pace (not a tempo, as this is an unmeasured exercise) that is purely moderate. He should neither be worried about having enough air to finish the phrase in one breath, nor should he be rushing through the notes, thereby sacrificing accuracy. The goal is to achieve a strong, unified sound when negotiating the two registers and the *passaggio*. The first measure is the range for the exercise, not part of it, and corresponds to the note marked with an arrow. In other words, this is the range of the starting pitch for each performance of this exercise.

The chosen range allows the singer to cover the entire range of the role. This serves to not only provide insight as to whether or not the range of the voice matches the role's demands, but also reveals any weaker areas of the range that may inhibit the singer's ability to project over the orchestra. The later consideration, of course, should be judged through the help of a reliable (and honest) coach, accompanist, teacher, etc.

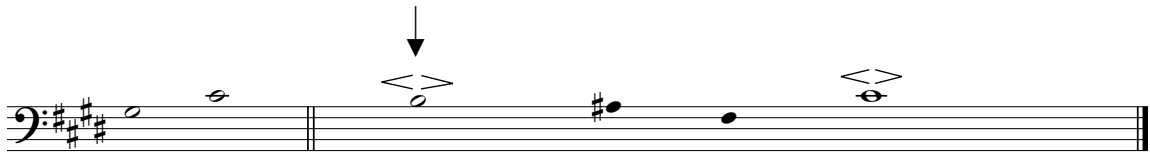
Exercise 2



This exercise mimics the intervals (both ascending and descending) as well as interval patterns that are found throughout the piece. The goal for this exercise is twofold,

in that the singer must strive for accuracy of pitches as well as unification of registers and the *passaggio*. The second aspect of this exercise is a continuation of Exercise 1, but in a different tonal context. Again, the singer should seek a pace—not a tempo—that is moderate in order to ensure both effective of breath management and pitch accuracy. As in Exercise 1, the range denoted in the first measure corresponds to the note marked with an arrow.

Exercise 3



This final exercise is geared toward testing (and building) stamina, effective breath management, and negotiation of the *passaggio* in an extended *legato* setting. The singer should do a very gradual *messa di voce* on the first note, followed by steady movement through the middle two notes, then followed by a final *messa di voce* symmetrical to the first. A long, steady, almost superhuman line is the ultimate goal of this exercise. It simulates the type of line and range the role demands. As with the first two exercises, the range in the first measure corresponds to the note marked with an arrow.

PHYSICAL EXERCISES

As was stated earlier the physical demands of this role are actually quite intense. These demands are not necessarily akin to those imposed by Figaro and Mephistofélès—roles characterized by an actively athletic quality. Rather, it is through the unmoving strength and command that is inherently Wotan that the performer will find himself fatiguing. Therefore, the following exercises have been designed with this very consideration in mind.⁵ I also recommend the singer wear the same kind of shoes that will be worn onstage. These exercises will not serve the performer nearly as much if he is used to wearing soft, overly cushioned athletic shoes, then has to abruptly change to harder leather soles.

It is also a good idea to acquire an eye patch from the local drugstore and go about these exercises, as well as his everyday duties at home, while wearing it. While this may sound like a trivial and rather “goofy” suggestion, the singer will find that depth perception is completely askew and that the loss of peripheral vision on one entire side will make the simplest task a real chore. These minor aggravations become real safety concerns on the stage and should not be taken lightly.

NOTE: It cannot be stressed enough that **the singer must not, I repeat not, lock his knees during any of the exercises that involve standing still**. This can cause him to become faint and fall, leading to a great deal of physical damage.

⁵ Let it be known that I believe a performer in proper physical shape will perform this role much more effectively than one who is not. Not only will it look more believable on stage for the modern audience (removing this extra “suspension of belief” layer will significantly add to the drama), the vocal and physical stamina required will be much more easily built.

Exercise 1: Der wandernde Wotan (The Wandering Wotan)

GOAL: to experience an accurate reproduction of the most basic physical strain placed upon the performer throughout the course of the opera and train the body to overcome it.

METHOD: To begin, the singer should warm up by taking a moderately long walk at a steady pace that allows the heart rate to stay somewhat elevated, but not so much as to cause shortness of breath.⁶ Once the singer feels as though his body is ready for activity, he should walk a short distance (about twenty to thirty feet) and stop. Standing still—but not locking the knees—hum through one or two of the exercises provided above, then stand quietly for two minutes. Repeat the exercise(s). Stand again for another two or so minutes, then resume walking. It is important that the singer remain completely still during the standing sessions in this exercise. This more adequately reflects the experience he will have onstage.

Gradually increase the length this exercise is performed, beginning with around twenty minutes of work and peaking around two hours or so. This can be done in a studio or practice room by simply walking in circles, forward and/or backward. Do a trial walk of twenty to thirty feet in a larger area and count the steps it takes. Then, use this number of steps every time you move. Should the voice begin to tire before your allotted time has passed, do not stop the exercise; just don't sing. Wotan spends the majority of his time onstage silently, watching the drama unfold and figuring out what his next move will be. The important aspect of this exercise is to maintain constant physical activity through the combination of walking and standing.

⁶ I estimate this to be about the pace one utilizes when walking through a grocery store to pick up that gallon of milk he forgot on his last trip.

Exercise 2: Der unbewegt Wotan (The unmoving Wotan)

GOAL: to achieve the active and focused utter stillness that is required during every single scene in which Wotan is involved.

METHOD: This exercise can be practiced in literally any location and at any time (even while waiting at the bureau of motor vehicles or the bank). To execute it, the singer finds a location that will allow for (or require) a long period of standing completely still (or at least with the very small amount of movement a queue provides). Begin by standing for ten minutes. Take a bit of a rest by either sitting down, or stretching your sides, back and core, then stand again for ten minutes. Repeat this three times.

As the singer becomes stronger and thereby less fatigued, he should gradually increase the amount of standing time by two-minute intervals until he reaches twenty minutes. Maintaining good posture and keeping the core muscles engaged the entire time will further strengthen the core and reduce the strain on the lower back. It is also best to do this on a hard floor or surface, as the stage will most likely be of the usual hardwood construction.

Exercise 3: Der erwachte Wotan (The Awakened Wotan)

GOAL: to build a technique that allows for efficient singing while laying on one's back and side.

METHOD: Once vocally warmed up, the singer should find a clean area where he can lay on his back or side comfortably and completely stretched out on the floor. For the first few executions of this exercise, he should lie on a thick blanket, sleeping bag, or other such type of thin cushion and prop up his head on a small pillow or other such object. It is much easier on the joints and bones to begin this way than by going straight to a cold, unforgiving tile or hardwood floor.

The singer should briefly work through a couple of the less-difficult exercises from above and then perhaps sing through one aria in order to get acquainted with this position, AND THEN STOP. This can be very hard on the body if he is not used to it, and can also lead to some serious physiological problems. Also, if the singer has any sort of back problem or arthritis, this should NOT be practiced. Should this be the case, the director needs to be notified immediately so that the staging can be altered to accommodate the singer's physical needs. (An alternative would be to wake up in a chair or from a sleeping-standing-up position.)

Assuming all is physically normal, the singer should continue adding this exercise into his daily practice routine, gradually increasing the amount of time spent singing on his back or side. Eventually, he should remove the blanket. Upon doing this, he should cut back the amount of time again, so as to allow the body ample time to adjust to the colder, harder surface underneath it. Remember that the body's anaerobic system sees an increase in strength and stamina much faster than its muscular and skeletal systems, so this adaptation must be made over a longer period of time. This approach is akin to that of marathon training, which is fitting as Wagnerian operas are essentially the marathons of the genre.

When adding time, the singer must take into consideration two major factors:

- 1) The amount of time spent on one's back during a performance of this role is relatively short (perhaps no more than two or three minutes, depending upon tempi, staging, and arrival to places).
- 2) The amount of time spent on one's back during the rehearsal process will be quite long.

Based upon these two statements, the singer will be able to discern his own appropriate goal time based upon his unique physical state and the amount of time he chooses to be on the floor during staging rehearsals. I usually believe that it's best to prepare for more than what is potentially required, but not with this particular exercise. As it deals directly with bone and joint health, it should be approached with the utmost care and caution. Furthermore, if one can avoid doing this exercise on a tile, concrete, marble or other type of stone floor, I highly recommend that. Hardwood floors aren't usually as cold as these other types. They also are more receptive to the body's heat and will sooner radiate it in return.

DRAMATIC EXERCISES

Any professional already engrossed in his career will surely scoff at this section more than the other two. Why might he do these exercises? He has, after all, been singing for years to great acclaim! How dare I suggest he is dramatically inadequate!? Sadly, the majority of singers are merely that: singers. As a result, audiences are bored by their presentations and are not enthusiastic about attending any future operas. In order to change the audience's reactions, one must forget about being merely a singer and always strive to be something much more artistically noteworthy: a *performer*.

Every singer has heard the all-too-familiar cliché about the obese female's musical emission that ends every single thing that was, is, or ever will be. I would also venture that the majority of Wagnerians (even if they fit the physical bill) loathe this statement even more because they are the image being portrayed. Therefore, the stakes are even higher to not just meet, but to exceed the audience's dramatic expectations by becoming a true performer. The ideal Wotan needs a certain charismatic stoicism that is infused with athleticism, grace, mystery, and virility.

Now, even if the singer fits few or none of these qualities, he can still make the audience believe that he not only embodies them, but actually defines them. This doesn't require long hours at the gym, a "clean" diet or anything of the sort (even though those are very important to overall health). There is only one simple exercise that will instantly and permanently provide the performer with these god-like characteristics every single time he steps in front of an audience. So, what is this too-good-to-be-true miracle exercise that will make opera-goers see the performer as the true statuesque god he is? It is called: good acting.

All joking aside, when one thinks about the greatest male entertainment figures of all time, actors are almost always at the top of the list. They are always so powerful and exude strength and masculinity. The truth about these larger-than-life figures, though, is that they are usually under 5'8" and are not always in the greatest shape. Yet, we see them as absolute giants. This is no mystery. They carry and portray themselves in a way that makes it easy to give them a bigger stature than they actually possess.

The same goes for the operatic stage. Not everyone is a Gerome Hines or Matti Salminen. Yet, when a man carries himself a certain way, he provides the illusion and

will not need the elevated boots that Sam Ramey is so famous to have used throughout his career. A great example is George London. He wasn't an incredibly large man. However, when he paired his dynamic voice with a proper carriage, he became a giant. Even those who have never been big fans of his dramatic prowess, or even his real-life persona, cannot deny that he was excellent at portraying himself as a much larger person.

So, how does one do this? The ensuing exercises will place the reader on the correct path to assuming such a persona. When performing these, it is important to always maintain the utmost sincerity and put forth the strongest efforts. Otherwise, this is simply a waste of time and energy. Each exercise is a stand-alone exercise, meaning they can be done in any order, in conjunction with the others or by themselves, and can be repeated as necessary on a daily or even weekly basis.

Exercise 1: Many Shades, More Colors

GOAL: To successfully present more than one desired product from the same work.

METHOD: Find a monologue, poem or speech that you find to be particularly interesting. Answer the following questions:

Why am I drawn to this?

What qualities make it particularly compelling?

What is the overall mood?

Can this be applied to a different situation than the one in which it is presented? If so, what are they and what would be the potential effect? (for monologues and speeches)

Concerning the last question, would the overall effect be changed if it were performed by someone of the opposite sex? Why? How?

Once these have been answered about your chosen piece, set up a video recording device and present the piece in a way that replicates your answers above. Once you have achieved a sufficient presentation, make changes to the delivery in order to also change

your answers to the above questions. This should also be done in front of a video camera so that you can see whether or not you have changed the impact. If not, figure out why. Repeat this procedure until you are satisfied that your presentation has achieved your desired change in effect.

Exercise 2: You Are Your Walk

GOAL: To truly see people's reactions to the many ways people move.

METHOD: This is an exercise I devised while pursuing my Master of Music degree. I was very curious as to whether or not my outward physical portrayals were accurate compared to my inner perception. Having never been a robust person, I feared that what I thought was a strong and virile presentation was really just a comic attempt. Therefore, I decided that true field research was needed and I performed it while walking through Indiana University's campus between classes. Here is an explanation of the way it works.

Choose a type of character, such as strong, weak, young, old, angry, elated, sad, judgmental, fast walker, slow walker, etc. Then, simply go to a public place (shopping mall, grocery store, etc.) and go about your normal day, but with the characteristics of that person. Keep in mind the way people might normally react to someone who exhibits those tendencies, then pay attention to see if you are receiving the same response. For example, if you choose to be an angry person, the types of reactions you receive might include:

- avoidance
- lack of eye contact
- residual anger

- unwillingness to ask if you need help (in the case of a store)

If you don't seem to be getting much of a reaction from people after about twenty minutes, then reevaluate the way you are moving and acting and make some changes.

Once you feel as though you are actually receiving the types of reactions that a person with those characteristics should be receiving, change your personality to a different one and repeat the process. When you do this, make sure that you are either in a large enough area that you won't see the same people multiple times or relocate to another location.

The most important step comes when you begin receiving the appropriate responses. It is then that you must pay absolute attention to the way the physicality of your face and your entire body feels. You want the transitions into these types of characters to come easily and immediately. **BEGIN BUILDING MUSCLE MEMORY NOW.** In the exact same way you must do this to solidify your vocal technique, it is critical that you do so for your physical movement. We have all seen the singers who make the audience feel awkward because they are so bad on stage. You do not want to be that person. Rather, strive to be noted as much for your stagecraft as you are for your vocal abilities. You will then become a more complete package.

CHAPTER 2

A CUT ABOVE THE REST: WHAT MAKES THIS GUIDE UNIQUE

One of the first questions faced in the preparation of this document is along the lines of, “So what?” Non-musicians do not understand the necessity for anything beyond sheet music, your voice, a piano, and a practice room. Instrumentalists do not understand why singers need to spend so much time learning languages and exploring the inner psyche of themselves and of the characters they are studying. Some singers do not understand why we need anything but a good teacher, coach, accompanist, and critical edition (As a good many professional musicians would agree, God forbid we bring a *performance* edition to the rehearsal process!).

It is precisely because of this lack of understanding that I feel as though this guide is necessary. As far as the over-arching question of, “So what?” is concerned, I believe that this same question can be asked of every subject that doesn’t put food on the table, doesn’t address one’s physical and mental health through the means of modern medicine, or isn’t concerned with the safety and well-being of oneself and his or her family. However, without art—or, more specifically for this argument, music—we as humans are lacking in a good many areas. For example, art is important because it teaches empathy. In this opera, the weeping strings, foreboding low brass, and vocal cries full of angst all unite with the dramatic progression, creating a veritable *tour de force* that moves our very souls. Alberich’s plight for unattainable love from the cruelly flirtatious Rheinmaidens strikes a chord with our own personal failures, allowing us to identify with him (perhaps the only time we do so throughout the entire cycle). We feel Freia’s fright as the giants

pursue her. Our bodies feel the pain that causes Loge's cries of agony. Finally, we feel the same sense of hope and security the gods feel when crossing into Valhalla as the triumphant brass and percussion overtake every fiber of our being

Culture and the arts are two main aspects that separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom. We are further made unique within that separation through each location's cultural output. Historically, the societies with the greatest power also had the most focused view of the arts (Greece, Rome, etc.). Furthermore, a creative outlet really does have healing powers. Countless studies, books and articles have been and are being published in order to show that the development of oneself through artistic ventures and hobbies leads to an overall balanced mind and lifestyle.

From a musician's standpoint, we must always be searching to improve our craft in order to continue finding worth in our calling. The greatest musicians all find ways in which to further their craft and never cease learning. The lessons these singers seek include: an ever-changing technical evaluation as their bodies age and mature; a more deeply profound philosophical understanding of their own place within both the artistic realm and the world as a whole; a more refined mastery of languages and literature; and an irrepressible desire to apply new musical ideas to a piece, no matter how often it has been performed. Therefore, I see it only fitting that a performer who is working at a high caliber and seeking the greatest artistic output would find a role preparation guide to be invaluable, if only to gain additional insight through another's preparatory process and findings.

As the reader peruses the pages of this guide, he or she will find a wealth of collected information about the role of Wotan in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. This is

information that I deem not only necessary in the preparation of this role, but that is critical for the creation of a well thought-out, thoroughly prepared portrayal. One of the best ways to define something is to first determine what it is not. Therefore, let me first clarify what the reader of this text should *not* expect.

This is not a guide for proper technique of the singing voice. There are a great many such guides available on the market from authors such as Richard Miller, Barbara Doscher, and a myriad of others. While I agree with some of their points and disagree with others, I am not attempting to distill what I believe to be a correct conglomeration of their respective techniques. Therefore, if the reader is looking solely for a description of proper Wagnerian singing technique, he or she should look elsewhere. On a related note, if the reader of this book is still seeking to build a strong technique, he should put this guide down now, as he is not yet at the level of preparation necessary for this guide to be useful. The care and protection of the voice should always come first, and a solid technique is an absolute must.

This is not a translation or pronunciation guide. There are many libretto aids available, as well as German to English dictionaries (the most effective method for the translation aspect of role preparation). Furthermore, Nico Castel has published a useful guide for the entire Ring cycle that contains both a translation and transliteration. My goal is not to re-invent the wheel. Furthermore, it is assumed that the reader of this book will already be beyond this point in the preparation process, as Wotan is by no means a beginner's role.

This is not a staging of the opera. While I am including a great deal of insight as to what Wagner intended to happen on stage, as well as discussing possibilities

concerning what directors may “throw at” the performer, I am not providing a full, or even partial, staging of *Das Rheingold*. This guide is designed to provide information as to the original intent of the opera’s creator and to make the reader aware of potential situations (both good and problematic) that may arise with certain stagings. I feel as though it is best to enter a job as completely prepared as possible for anything that may be asked. Therefore, anticipating a variety of options will only make the performer much more adaptable.

Now that we have defined what the reader will not find within these pages, let us look at how this guide will help the reader by addressing some questions:

How do I know if this Wotan is right for me? When approaching a new role, it is important to have as much information about every single aspect as is possible. It is also vital to assess whether or not the role is actually performable by taking an honest observation of one’s technical and dramatic prowess, as well as natural vocal ability and physical prowess. Therefore, the reader will be given some exercises that will test these very aspects.

I have devised some musical examples that mirror the demands of the role. They will challenge the singer’s range, tessitura, stamina and sheer projection ability within Wagnerian parameters. (The exercises that test projection ability are designed to be executed with a reliable teacher, coach and/or accompanist who knows what is required and will give an honest, educated opinion.) I have taken great pains to ensure that they are extremely similar to Wagner’s composition. This way, the singer will gain an accurate and realistic observation as to the fit of his voice for the role.

The dramatic exercises may seem a bit touchy-feely to some. However, with the ever-greater power of the stage director, singers MUST be prepared to work both within and outside of the proverbial box. That being said, these exercises must be approached with the utmost seriousness and sincerity. Only then will the singer know if he is comfortable performing a more traditional staging in, say, Chicago in September, then traveling to Berlin in October, only to do the entire role on point, wearing a purple zebra print tutu and holding a tennis racket instead of a spear, all while the gods of Valhalla have an orgy on a stage that is littered with half-completed needlepoint projects.

The last set of exercises in this section is devoted to physical prowess. This was not as much of a concern even two decades ago. However, with new and innovative concepts and less traditional set designs—such as the most recent *Cirque du Soleil*-style production at the Metropolitan Opera—as well as the sudden strong emphasis on physical appearance over vocal talent, this is a very serious consideration. The singer will be challenged to perform certain physical tasks, while both singing and not singing, to determine whether the body is as fit as the voice.

One further note for this section derives from my own personal view of the operatic craft. I approach my singing, as well as that of my students, in a very athletic fashion. It is very much a holistic process, and I feel as though the instrument's full potential cannot possibly be achieved without utilizing the entire body. In my own practice, as well as in my observations of others, I can very confidently state that this methodology only further serves the singer and elevates the art form to a much higher level.

From whence does Wotan come? As every seasoned performer knows, it is good to have as complete an understanding of the character being studied and performed as is possible. This holds especially true when it comes to literary and/or religious characters, as the similarities and differences will help the overall dramatic shape of the performance.

In the case of Wotan, we are confronted with a character that is considered to be both a literary *and* a religious character. The *Eddas* (Poetic and Prose) have survived as written records of Viking and early Icelandic beliefs, and are the main documents of Norse mythology. In other words, these are the Norse bibles. They contain the stories of the trials, victories, exploits, and ultimate fail of the beings that inhabit the three realms. We learn about the giants, humans, gods, etc., and what their purposes were, and the ways in which they fulfilled them, despite any turmoil that arises around them.

Other important documents for the *Ring* as a whole are *The Saga of the Volsungs*, which is also a Norse mythological story of the Völsung race, beginning from its creation and ending with the cataclysmic end of the world, and the German mythological saga entitled the *Nibelungenlied*. These two documents greatly influenced Wagner, especially *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

How did Wagner intend the premier to be produced? Anyone who knows anything about Richard Wagner and his megalomaniacal personality will expect a very strong opinion as to the way he wanted his works to be produced. This is absolutely correct. He was also, shall we say, less than modest as to the impact his four-night epic was to have on music, not to mention world history as a whole. Therefore, he actually

paid an assistant, Heinrich Porges, to take copious notes during the rehearsal process for the première at Bayreuth.

Porges' resulting journal is arguably the greatest look into Wagner's rehearsal and production process. Whereas some aspects may be tainted slightly in favor of portraying Wagner in a favorable light (the old "Don't bite the hand that feeds you!" adage), I do feel as though Porges prepared a very accurate representation of not only the good aspects, but also of the strains and pressures associated with the première. We see some of the ways in which Wagner attempted to blend conventions of Shakespeare into his creations. Porges also gives a great deal of insight into the German musical idiom that Wagner strove so hard to define and create.

Another source consulted contains the collected diaries of Richard Fricke. Fricke was not only Wagner's preferred ballet master, but was also a close friend and colleague. His role, though, was just as much that of peacemaker, as he was the one who appeased all parties and sought to improve the overall mood of the entire experience. This source really gives us a look at both Wagner's disposition and the experience of premiering a high-profile work in nineteenth-century Germany.

The combination of these two sources provides the reader with a compendium of sorts that presents the important points about the role from Wagner's perspective. With this information, the performer is armed with a wealth of knowledge to protect himself against any dangerous staging or musical ideas—both physically and professionally—a director or conductor may try to force upon him. As singers are becoming increasingly expendable, with the growing talent pool and shrinking market, this knowledge-based

weapon can only help protect against any career threatening nonsense. After all, a singer's *first* job is to protect him- or herself.

The reader is encouraged to take an interactive approach to this guide, and to read it in a very active fashion. Perform the exercises with a full-bore approach. Digest the information and internalize the facts. Scrutinize it as a true intellectual. This guide should become as much of a part of you as the role will become (should it properly fit you). Then, once you have used it to the fullest, refine it to only serve you. Remember that this is intended to be an aid to help you reach your goal of presenting the finest Wotan you can possibly create.

CHAPTER 3

EDDIC POETRY, MYTHOLOGICAL ICELANDIC SAGAS AND GERMAN

LEGENDS: WOTAN'S LITERARY BEGINNINGS

Wotan [sic], except in the noble scene with *Brünhilde* [sic] in the finale of “The Valkyr,” is a bore. He is Wagner’s one failure—and Wagner’s failure was on as colossal a scale as his successes were. *Wotan* [sic] is the chief of the gods, a race marked out by fate for annihilation. Walking in the shadow of impending destruction he would, one might suppose, bear himself with a certain tragic dignity. Instead of this, however, he is constantly bemoaning his fate and hence strikes one as contemptible rather than as tragic. Moreover, even if his outbursts of grief were tragic instead of ridiculous and wearisome, we could hardly clothe with god-like dignity a character who pursues the female sex—divine, semi-divine and purely human—with the persistency of a mythological Mormon and has reared a numerous family each member of which would probably find considerable difficulty in identifying his or her mother.⁷

Gustav Kobbé, one of history’s leading operatic experts, described Wagner’s Wotan thusly. This is a very strong and, admittedly, surprising statement concerning the character that is quite often revered as one of the greatest and most challenging male roles in all of opera. Mr. Kobbé’s stance isn’t confined to just the *Rheingold* Wotan, either; he is speaking of the work as a whole. What would be the basis of his statement, especially since he doesn’t qualify it any further than the above excerpt?⁸ For a person

⁷ Kobbé, Gustav, *Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung: A Descriptive Analysis Containing All the Leading Motives*, Seventh Edition (New York: Schirmer, 1896), ix.

⁸ The only further qualification is Mr. Kobbé’s position that Brünhilde is the greatest character ever created, thus standing as Wagner’s greatest and most sublime accomplishment. He further describes her as the embodiment of purity and all things selfless and good. Through this claim, he has, in effect, defined his view of Wotan by simply defining what Wotan is *not*. While this is all well and good, he should have, perhaps, gone into a little more detail concerning the virtues of Wotan and the ways in

who is neither acquainted with Wagner's work nor with the original Norse myths, Wotan seems to be nothing more than an ancient Icelandic version of Austin Powers, Shakespeare's Henry V, Brigham Young and a member of a free-sex nudist compound all rolled into one.

Those of us who are familiar with Wotan's plights and characteristics, however, know that this is just not true on many levels. The character of Wotan, while not quite as "deep" as Brünnhilde, Alberich or Hagen, is faced with a great deal of moral and ethical conundrums—conundrums which, when taken out of their mythological context, are actually very human in nature.

In this chapter, I will look at the actual Norse myths upon which Wagner based his epic. Taking into account the two Eddas (Poetic and Prose), as well as *The Saga of the Volsungs* and the *Nibelungenlied*, the transformation of Odin into Wagner's Wotan will be seen through their similarities and differences. This examination of these tales will provide information as to who Odin is and who his family, allies and enemies are. Furthermore, Wagner's distillation of these tales in the context of *Das Rheingold* will be made apparent.

As it has remained a symbol of Germanic pride and patriotism for over a century, many people believe that the *Ring* is based upon German myths and legends. This is only partially true. While the German *Nibelungenlied* was one of Wagner's sources of inspiration, it was not the only one. Neither was it the most influential. Even though the titles are strikingly similar (*Der Ring des Nibelungen* vs. *Nibelungenlied*), Wagner was

which Wotan's character both supports his views and contradicts them. This is a "rookie mistake" for an academic writer such as Mr. Kobbé, and serves only to weaken his view from an educated conjecture to merely an editorial opinion.

most influenced by *The Saga of the Volsungs*. These are Norse myths and, while they follow the same general narrative and present the same legend, there are some differences between the two.⁹

When trying to undertake a task such as this—especially one that is full of Icelandic names with which the majority of English-speakers are unfamiliar, both in meaning and pronunciation—trying to map out the best way of presenting this information is a challenge in and of itself. That being said, rather than doing a side-by-side comparison based upon the chronology of the opera and its literary ancestors, I have divided this chapter into many subsections, each of which will address a major literary event, topic or characteristic. Information concerning the similarities and/or differences between the myths and Wagner’s realization will be discussed within these subsections. Now, let’s put on our Nordic sweaters, grab a horn full of mead, and let our excursion through the nine worlds begin.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Throughout the Norse myths, gods, giants, dwarves, animals, trees and even some weapons have more than one name. Odin, however, is the undisputed champion of epithets. This is due to various regional languages, poetic references, and the tradition in ancient Icelandic and Norse poetry that provides various deeds, events, locations, items, people and characteristics in Norse mythology their own names.¹⁰

⁹ It should be noted that I will be discussing primarily the content within Snorri’s *Prose Edda*. It is the most clearly-written and is the most familiar of the Norse sources.

¹⁰ We also see this in Biblical writings. For example, in the Gospels, the hill where Jesus was crucified was known as Golgotha, or “the Skull,” because it looked like the top of a skull, round and smooth. The name has also been interpreted as actually

It is rather simple to understand the difference in names between languages and dialects. We see the very same thing in Christianity when discussing God: in Spanish—Dios; in Italian—Dio; French—Dieu; German—Herr. There are even different names within each language. In English, for example, God is also called Father, Lord, Father Almighty, Yahweh, and, in Arkansas, Lordy, Lordy, Lordy! This concept is not a new one, and it only stands to reason that another religion would have the same. However, it is much more complicated and specific in Norse belief. Everything has more than one name. Gold, for example, has numerous names based upon exploits, tragedies and cunning tricks that were performed by the gods, giants, dwarves, humans and sorcerers. It is because of this complexity, and because Wotan is the main subject of this discussion, that I am only going to focus on Odin at this point.

Like all other people, places, objects and events, Odin was given a different name for every characteristic, relationship, and major exploit. For example, two ravens, Hugin and Munin, sit on Odin's shoulders and tell him all the news they see or hear during each day's excursion over the whole world. He sends them at dawn and they return at dinner time. Because of this, he is called the raven-god. Odin is also called Val-father, or "father of the slain." This name comes from the creation of his army, which is further explained below.

All battles are overseen by Odin himself as well as by a special group of women, the Valkyries. They are all battle warriors as well as servants to the gods in Valhalla. The first two valkyries on the battlefield are Rota and Gunn, who choose who will die that

being a misspelling of the Aramic term *Gol Goatha*, which translates as "mount of execution." Either way, this is an instance of a location being named due to physical characteristics as well as utility.

day.¹¹ The slain warriors are then taken back to Valhalla. Half are taken by the valkyries, and the other half are taken by Odin himself. Once within Valhalla, they are revived and join the ranks of Odin's army, the *Einherjar*.¹² They serve him within the walls of, as well as protect, Valhalla. Thus, he is their Val-father.

Here is a list of most of the names, in alphabetical order, Odin has been given:¹³

All-father	Helblindi	Sidskegg
Atrid	Herian	Sig-father
Baleyg	Herran	Sigtyr
Bifildi	Herteit	Skilfing
Biflindi	Hialmberi	Slaughter-Gaut
Bileyg	Hiarrandi	Svafnir
Blindi	High	Svidar
Bolverk	Hnikar	Svidrir
Cargo-Tyr (god of cargoes)	Hnikud	Svidur
Eindridi	Host-Tyr	Svipal
Farma-god (god of cargoes)	Hropt (sage, as in wisdom)	Svolnir
Farmatyr	Hropta-Tyr	Thekk
Fiolnir	Ialk	Third
Fiolsvinn	Just-as-high	Thror
Ganglari	Kialar	Thund
Gaut	Nikar	Thunn
Gauta-Tyr (god of men)	Nikuz	Unn
Glapsvinn	Omi	Vafud
Gondlir	Oski	Vakr
Grim	Raven-god	Val-father
Grimnir	Rognir	Veratyr
Hanga-god (god of the hanged)	Sann	Victory-Tyr (god of victory)
Hanged-Tyr (god of the hanged)	Sanngetal	Vidrir
Hapta-god (god of prisoners)	Sidhott	Vidur
Harbard		Ygg (terrible one)

¹¹ Sturluson, Snorri, *Edda*, trans. and ed. by Anthony Faulkes (Vermont: Everyman, 1995), 31.

¹² Sturluson, 21.

¹³ I use the term "most of" because these are the names I have found in the two *Eddas* (*Prose* and *Poetic*) and *The Saga of the Volsungs*. More names are found in other documents, such as the *Yngling Saga* and *Völuspá*, two other important written records of Norse myth.

I have provided the meanings of some of the names that are used most frequently, but not for all of them. Every name has a meaning in Icelandic, just as names in other languages have meanings. For our purposes, though, the meaning of every single name is not necessary; just that these names exist is the point.

The sheer volume of names given to Odin is staggering. It serves as further proof of Odin's multifaceted character, as well as his importance as a religious and mythological figure. Norsemen prayed to him for a variety of things. While most prayers were geared toward the battlefield, others—such as for wisdom—were sincere pleas for help in self-improvement. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Mr. Kobbé was so hard on Wagner's Wotan.

WHO IS ODIN?

In Norse belief, the father of all of creation is considered to be Odin. He was the supreme being and maintained ultimate power until his fateful day when the giant Ganglieri's ancestors waged war and destroyed the race of gods. Before that aspect of the character is revealed, though, this discussion will focus on the “real-life” Odin Snorri Sturluson revealed in the Prologue of his *Edda*. This Odin seems to be a way of explaining away the Norse religion, as Snorri was a very strong Christian and Christianity had become the main religion of the region; specifically, the Lutheran denomination.

The human Odin was from Turkey. As opposed to the mythological being, he was actually the son of Thor, who was the son of the king Munan, son-in-law of the high king Priam. Odin married Frigida, who was called Frigg. They both possessed the gift of

prophecy, and through it learned that “his name would be remembered in the northern part of the world and honored above all kings.”¹⁴

Odin decided to leave Turkey. When he did so, he had an immense following of all ages, as well as many precious items. Such was the procession that they seemed more like gods than men, as they passed through many countries on their way to Saxony. Odin remained here for a long while and gained possession of large parts of the land. He put three sons in charge: Veggdegg, a powerful king who ruled over east Saxony; Beldegg, called Baldr, who ruled over the area now called Westphalia; and Siggi, whose dynasty ruled over what is now France and from whom descended the Volsung line.

Odin then travelled north and gained possession of the land they called Reidgotaland. He placed his son Skiold in charge, from whom descends the Skioldungs, who are the kings of Denmark. From there, Odin travelled to Sweden, whose king was Gylfi. Gylfi met Odin and his men from Asia (called Æsir, which is also what the race of Gods is called in the mythological stories) and “offered Odin as much power in his realm as he wished himself.”¹⁵ Odin selected Sigtunir as the site for his city. He organized rulers in the same pattern as was established in Troy, set up twelve chiefs to administer the laws of the land, established the legal system in the fashion of Troy, and set his son Yngvi as king over all. From Yngvi is descended the Ynglings.

Odin then travelled north to the ocean and set his son Sæming over this realm, which is called Norway. All of the kings of Norway are said to be able to trace their ancestry to Sæming. It is because of this large-scale, diversified emigration that Snorri

¹⁴ Sturluson, 3.

¹⁵ Sturluson, 4.

wrote that all of the languages of Norway, Sweden, Saxony and Denmark are derived from the Asian language that was brought by these men.

The name Sæmling appears in other sagas as well. Whether or not this is the truth concerning the ancient genealogy of the Scandinavian region of the world is of no great importance, as it does not influence the story of the *Ring*. The main point is to know that this explaining away of the myths exists. Now, rather than merely mention the myths in passing, let the discussion now turn to them.

Odin's influence was far-reaching. Not only was he the eldest, and therefore considered father of all the gods,¹⁶ he was likewise a great warrior and bestowed gifts upon other great warriors. Men would fight very valiantly in battle so that they would be chosen by the valkyries to join Odin's army upon their death on the battlefield, as explained above.

Actually descended from the race of giants, Odin is known as the god who is responsible for, with the help of his brothers Vili and Ve, defeating the evil frost giants and for killing the first and most powerful of them, Ymir who was created from the rime and poisonous ice in Ginnungagap (the vast, empty, primordial space that existed before the creation of the universe) that was melted by a warm, inward blowing vapor.¹⁷ Ymir's body was then taken to the middle of Ginnungagap and used to create everything in the universe; the earth was made from his flesh, the seas and rivers from his blood, trees from his hair, the sky and the four cardinal directions from his skull, Midgard (a fortification against the frost-giants) from his eyelashes, the clouds from his brains, the rocks from his

¹⁶ Sturluson, 8-9.

¹⁷ Sturluson, 10-11.

bones, and stone and scree from his teeth and more bones that were broken. They then took molten particles and sparks from the world of Muspell (a flaming, burning, bright world to the south) and fixed them in the skies to illuminate the earth. They then set these sparks' courses so that days could be distinguished and years could be counted. Finally, the brothers created man out of two logs they found while walking along the seashore. The man was called Ask and the woman Embla.¹⁸

The brothers created a city, called Asgard,¹⁹ which became home to the gods and all of their descendants. Odin established rulers and placed them in charge of the city's government at a central place called Idavoll. These gods built Gladsheim, a temple of gold that housed thirteen thrones (one for Odin and each of the rulers), as well as the beautiful Vingolf, which was the sanctuary for the goddesses. They also built forges, made tools, and built all of their furniture of gold. This was known as the Golden Age, but was ruined upon the arrival of women, who came from Giantland. Finally, these gods ascended their thrones, instituted courts, and created the dwarfs by giving maggots the shape of men and making them conscious with intelligence.²⁰

Odin dwelled in a place called Valaskialf.²¹ Within this place was his throne Hlidskialf, from which he was able to see all people and places as well as to understand everything.²² He was also very wise. This wisdom was gained by exchanging one of his

¹⁸ Sturluson, 12-13.

¹⁹ This is Wagner's Valhalla.

²⁰ Sturluson, 16.

²¹ Sturluson, 20.

²² Sturluson, 12.

eyes for a drink from Mimir's well using the horn called Giallarhorn. Mimir's well lies beneath the second root of Yggdrasil, the "world ash"²³ that is the holy place of the gods and whose branches spread over the whole world and extend across the sky.²⁴ It is because he gave his eye that Odin is always pictured with an eye patch, as should Wotan.²⁵

Odin married a woman named Frigg (Fricka), and from them descended the divine Æsir race.²⁶ As in some cultures, the males and females are referred to in different terms. The Norse myths present the same characteristic, as the men are referred to as the Æsir and the women as the Asyniur. Here is a list of Wotan's descendants:

The Æsir

Frigg

While also considered an Æsir, see under Asyniur.

Thor—also called Asa-Thor (Thor of the Æsir) and Oku-Thor (driving Thor)

- Odin's first son, he is strongest of all gods and men.
- He has three special possessions:
 - His hammer, Miolnir.
 - A girdle of might that, when buckled, doubles his As-strength.
 - A pair of iron gloves that must be worn when he wields his hammer.²⁷

N.B.—This is Wagner's Donner.

²³ The three Norns refer to this in the prologue to the fourth opera, *Götterdämmerung*.

²⁴ Sturluson, 17.

²⁵ This is one of the problems of the Metropolitan Opera's LePage production. Wotan does not have a patch, but has hair in front of his eye in *Das Rheingold* and black makeup around it for *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*. This is not only accurate to the story, but serves to actually accentuate the whiteness of the eyeball. I would not be so bothered by it if Mr. LePage did not make such a public din about his production being as close to what Wagner would have wanted as any other production. If an eye patch was not desired, then a great makeup job showing a sewn-shut eyelid or something along those lines would have more than sufficed.

²⁶ Sturluson, 12.

²⁷ Sturluson, 22.

Baldr the Good

- Odin's second son, he is so fair and bright that light shines from him. He is also the wisest of all the Æsir, beautifully spoken and most merciful. Yet, none of his decisions can be fulfilled²⁸
- After having dreams of his death, Frigg received oaths from all things and peoples that nothing could harm him. The only thing from which she did not receive an oath was mistletoe. Loki, not happy at the immortal showings-off of Baldr, disguised himself as a woman, and learned of the mistletoe weakness from Frigg. He then convinced the blind Hod to shoot a stick at Baldr, without Hod knowing that this stick was made of mistletoe. Thus came the death of Baldr.²⁹
N.B.—This is Wagner's Froh.

Niord

- Ruler of the motion of the wind and moderator of the sea and fire, he is the god to whom people pray for voyages and fishing. He is so rich and wealthy that he can grant wealth and possessions to those who pray to him.
- Not of the Æsir race (of the Vanir race), he was traded by the Vanir for the Æsir Hænir as a mutual truce pledge by the two peoples.
- He is married to Skadi, daughter of the giant Thiassi. After disagreeing on where they wanted to live (mountains or sea), the two decided to live apart. Niord had two children after this split: a son named Freyr and a daughter named Freyia.³⁰

Freyr

- The most glorious of the Æsir; ruler of rain and sunshine and, thus, produce, he prayed to for prosperity of peace. Freyr is also ruler over wealth.³¹

Freya

While also considered an Æsir, see under Asyniur.

Tyr

- Bravest and most valiant of the Æsir and having great power over victory in battles, men of action pray to him. He is also very clever.
- Proof of his bravery: The gods wanted to get the fetter Gleipnir on the wolf Fenriswolf in order to ensnare him. Fenriswolf didn't trust that the gods would let him go, so Tyr put his right hand in Fenriswolf's mouth as a pledge. When the gods wouldn't let Fenriswolf go, he bit off Tyr's hand at the wrist (which is called the wolf-joint). It is also because of this that Tyr is not considered a promoter of settlements among people.³²

²⁸ Sturluson, 23.

²⁹ Sturluson, 48-9.

³⁰ Sturluson, 23-4.

³¹ Sturluson, 24.

³² Sturluson, 25.

Bragi

- Renowned for wisdom and especially for eloquence and command of language, he was especially knowledgeable about poetry.
- His wife is Idunn, who keeps the apples the gods eat to maintain their youth.³³

N.B.—Wagner combined Freyr and Idunn to create Freia.

Heimdall

- Also called Hallinskidi and Gullintanni, he is known as the white As and has teeth of gold. Great and holy, Heimdall was born as the son of nine maidens, all of them sisters. He lives in Himinbiorg, which is by the Bifrost. From there, he is the gods' watchman and stands guard over the Bifrost. He needs less sleep than a bird, can see equally well at night and during the day, and can hear everything that is at least as loud as grass growing on the earth and wool on sheep. His trumpet, called Giallarhorn, can be heard in all worlds.³⁴

Hod

- Blind, yet very strong, he is said to not need a name because his handiwork will live on in legend longer than a name.³⁵

Vidar

- Vidar is known as “the silent As,” for he has a thick shoe. He is almost as strong as Thor and is a source of support for the gods in danger.³⁶

Ali (or Vali)

- Son of Odin and Rind, he is bold in battle and a very good shot.³⁷

Ull

- Son of Sif and stepson of Thor, he is the best archer and skier. He is beautiful in appearance, has a warrior's accomplishments, and is prayed to for single combat.³⁸

Forseti

- The son of Baldr and Nanna Nep's daughter, he lives in Glitnir and settles all legal disputes.³⁹

Loki (or Lopt; last name Laufeyiarson)

- Counted among the Æsir, he is actually the son of the giant Farbauti. His mother was Laufey (or Nal) and his brothers are Byleist and Helblindi. He is very handsome in appearance, evil in character and capricious in behavior. Loki

³³ Sturluson, 25.

³⁴ Sturluson, 25.

³⁵ Sturluson, 26.

³⁶ Sturluson, 26.

³⁷ Sturluson, 26.

³⁸ Sturluson, 26.

³⁹ Sturluson, 26.

possesses more cunning than the others and has tricks for every purpose, thereby always getting the Æsir into a bad fix, only to get them out using some sort of trickery.

- He is considered “Æsir’s calumniator and originator of deceits and the disgrace of all gods and men.”⁴⁰
- Wife is Sigyn and their son is Nari (or Narfi), but Loki had other offspring.
 - Angrboda, a giantess in Giantland, had three of his offspring: Fenriswolf, Iormungand (i.e. the Midgard serpent), and Hel. When the gods found out that these offspring were being raised in Giantland, they felt evil was going to be brought upon the gods by them due to their father’s nature, so Odin had them brought to him. He cast the serpent into the deep sea. Hel was thrown in to Niflheim, where she has authority over nine worlds. She provides room and board to those who are sent to her, which are the sick and dying. She is half black and half flesh-colored. Fenriswolf was brought up among the Æsir. Tyr was the only one with courage to approach it and feed it.⁴¹
- After causing the death of Baldr and also making it so that Baldr could not return from Hel, he fled from the wrath of the gods. He escaped them by turning into a salmon and hiding in a waterfall, but they fashioned a net (based upon the design that Loki himself created that they found burned in his fire, thereby making him the creator of the fishing net) and were able to capture him. They took him to a cave, set up three stones, turned his son Vali into a wolf, who then tore his other son Narfi to pieces. The gods then bound Loki to the three stones with Narfi’s guts, which turned to iron upon their binding him. A poisonous snake was hung above Loki’s head and drips poison onto his face. His wife, Sigyn, stands next to him with a bowl to collect the poison, but when she empties it, the poison drips onto Loki’s face. He jerks away so hard that the whole ground shakes, meaning he is the one who causes earthquakes. This setup will remain this way until Ragnarok (the end of time), at which point he will get loose, lead Muspell’s sons in battle against the Æsir in the field Vigrid, and he and Heimdall will slay each other.⁴²

Hermod the Bold

- Upon Baldr’s death (caused by Loki’s cunning), he rode to try to reclaim Baldr from Hel for Asgard.⁴³

⁴⁰ Sturluson, 26.

⁴¹ Sturluson, 27-9.

⁴² Sturluson, 51-2, 54.

⁴³ Sturluson, 49.

The Asyniur

Frigg

- Frigg is the highest of all the Asyniur⁴⁴
- She is Odin's wife and knows men's fates, but does not prophesy⁴⁵

Saga

Eir

Gefiun

- A virgin, she is attended by all who die virgins⁴⁶

Fulla

- A virgin, she goes around with free-flowing hair and a gold band around her head. She carries Frigg's casket (small ornamental box that holds jewels, etc., NOT her coffin), looks after her footwear and shares her secrets⁴⁷

Freya

- The most glorious of the Asyniur she lives in Folkvangar. She retrieves half of the slain warriors, while Odin retrieves the other half. (Wagner's Brünnhilde is entrusted with this task.) Freya is also prayed to for affairs of the heart⁴⁸
- Although highest in rank next to Frigg, she "married to someone named Od."⁴⁹ Their daughter, Hnoss, is incredibly beautiful, and from her name comes the word for treasures. Od made long journeys and Freiya stayed and wept tears of red gold. She is known as Lady of the Vanir
- Freya drives a chariot pulled by two cats⁵⁰

Siofn

- She directs people's minds to love, both men and women. From her name stems the word for affection.⁵¹

Lofn

- So kind and good to pray to that she gets leave to attend unions between men and women. From her name stems the word for permission.⁵²

⁴⁴ Sturluson, 29.

⁴⁵ Sturluson, 20.

⁴⁶ Sturluson, 29.

⁴⁷ Sturluson, 29.

⁴⁸ Sturluson, 24.

⁴⁹ Sturluson, 29.

⁵⁰ Sturluson, 29-30.

⁵¹ Sturluson, 30.

⁵² Sturluson, 30.

Var

- Sistens to people's oaths and private agreements, as well as punishes those who break them⁵³

Vor

- She is so wise and enquiring that nothing can be concealed from her.⁵⁴

Syn

- She guards the doors of the hall and shuts them against those who are not to enter. It is because of this that the word for denial stems from her name.⁵⁵

Hlin

- She protects people whom Frigg wishes to be safe.⁵⁶

Snotra

- Wise and courteous, the word for a wise person stems from her name.⁵⁷

Gna

- Sent to carry out Frigg's business in various worlds, her horse, Hofvarpnir, gallops across sea and sky. From her name stems the term applied to something that towers above.⁵⁸

Sol

- She rides her chariot across the sky to provide the light of the sun in daytime. Wolves relentlessly pursue her. Her sister, Máni, is the moon god.⁵⁹

Bil

- With her brother Hjúki, she follows Máni across the sky, carrying between them the pole Simul that holds the pail Sæg.⁶⁰

Sif (also called Sibyl)

- She is Thor's wife, is a prophetess and comes from unknown ancestry. Sif is the most beautiful of all women and has hair of gold.
- She is the mother of Thrud (valkyrie) and Loridi⁶¹

⁵³ Sturluson, 30.

⁵⁴ Sturluson, 30.

⁵⁵ Sturluson, 30.

⁵⁶ Sturluson, 30.

⁵⁷ Sturluson, 30.

⁵⁸ Sturluson, 30.

⁵⁹ Sturluson, 30.

⁶⁰ Sturluson, 30.

⁶¹ Sturluson, 26.

The Valkyries

- Hrist
- Mist
- Skeggiold
- Skogul
- Hild
- Thrud
- Hlokk
- Herfiotur
- Goll
- Geirahod
- Randgrid
- Radgrid
- Reginleif
- Gunn—Her name means war. She is first on the battlefield with the Rota and Skuld to choose who will die and to govern the killings.
- Rota—see note on Gunn
- Skuld—the youngest norn; see note on Gunn
- The valkyries are sent into every battle by Odin to allot death to men and to govern victory. They also serve the gods in Val-hall⁶²

Iorn—Thor's mother

Rind—Vali's (Ali) mother

As mentioned above, the Yggdrasil was believed to spread across the entire manifest universe, as well as all other realms and heavens. The gods were able to travel between the realms and Yggdrasil's branches using the Bifrost (also called the As-bridge),⁶³ which is what the human race calls a rainbow. It was very strong and built with greater art and skill than other constructions. Yet, as strong as it was built, it was believed that the frost-giant Muspell's descendants would break it when they attack Asgard to defeat the gods.⁶⁴ This will also be the end of the world, which is referred to as Ragnarok,

⁶² Sturluson, 31.

⁶³ Sturluson, 17.

⁶⁴ Sturluson, 15.

at which time Odin will be devoured by Fenriswolf, the wolf that was captured and kept ensnared by the gods.⁶⁵

Until this time, the only ones who could ride over the Bifrost were the gods because they were the only ones who were capable of crossing fire, for the red in the Bifrost is actually burning fire.⁶⁶ Odin traveled all of creation on his horse, Sleipnir. Sleipnir was the greatest horse ever created, had eight legs, and descended from Svadilfæri, who actually plays an important part in the story that is the basis of *Das Rheingold*.

A builder (a giant) came to the gods and told them that he could build them an impenetrable fortress in three years. His payment—Freyia would be his wife and he would also receive the sun and the moon. The gods countered and said he would receive this payment if he did it in one year rather than three and that he would receive help from no man. The man countered back saying he wanted the help from his stallion, Svadilfæri. Loki convinced the gods to acquiesce to this request, and the pact was made. The stallion was much more powerful than any of the gods had imagined, and the gods realized three days out from the deadline that the giant was going to prevail. They all threatened Loki, since he was the one who convinced them to allow the stallion, and told him that if he didn't figure out a scheme to convince the builder to forfeit his payment, he would be dealt an evil death.

That evening, a mare attracted the stallion Svadilfæri's attention, causing it to break free and chase the mare through the forest. The builder chased after them, trying to

⁶⁵ Sturluson, 52-54.

⁶⁶ Sturluson, 18.

get control of Svadilfæri, and thereby losing almost two full days of building. Upon realizing he wasn't going to finish in time due to this mare leading his stallion astray, he flew into a rage. The gods saw that he was a very powerful mountain-giant, discarded the oaths, and called on Thor to immediately defeat him with his hammer, Mjollnir. Soon after this, because Loki "had had such dealings with Svadilfæri," Loki soon gave birth to a grey, eight-legged foal that was the best of all horses: Sleipnir.⁶⁷

Aside from Thor (Donner) destroying the giant with his hammer, the twisted episode of bestiality on the part of Loki (Loge), and the lack of the Nibelung hoard, this story is pretty much the same backdrop that gets the gods involved in the struggles of *Das Rheingold's* narrative.

Odin is also credited with bringing the art of poetry to the Æsir. He brought it in the form of mead made from honey and the blood of the wisest man who ever lived, Kvasir. Odin had to steal Kvasir's blood from Suttung, the son of the giant Gilling (who was also killed by the dwarves who made mead from Kvasir's blood), by assuming the form of a worker, then a snake, and finally an eagle.⁶⁸

The gift of poetry is an important one, for it is the medium in which stories of praise and revelation were written. These poems, like many from other cultures, created their own symbolic language. For example, battle is referred to as the weather of Odin⁶⁹ fires and swords are referred to as Odin's fires.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Sturluson, 35-6.

⁶⁸ Sturluson, 62-4.

⁶⁹ Sturluson, 117.

⁷⁰ Sturluson, 118.

As the *Ring*'s narrative continues through the ensuing operas, it is quite easy to find the numerous literary influences that Wagner included in his *magnum opus*. Even though many differences do exist—much in the same way there are many differences between Goethe's *Faust* and Gounod's opera of the same name—it is important for the performer to know the scope of the character he is portraying. In knowing this, he should take great pains to truly portray Wotan as the important, all-powerful All-father that his literary equal Odin is. When this is accomplished, critics will be singing their own praises of the character, rather than simply agreeing with Mr. Kobbé's editorial.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS: SETTING THE STAGE FOR WAGNER'S

MAGNUM OPUS

It is a well-known fact that Wagner's music has been far-reaching since each work received its premier. However, none has had such a dramatic and popular build-up as *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Not only was it a great coup for the German people, it was a massive, innovative step that has forever changed the arts as a whole. It has transformed movie scores, stage production, audience experience and dramatic narratives, just to name a few. So, how and why did this occur? This chapter will endeavor to provide an overview of the main steps and historical innovations that led to the *Ring's* attaining the position near the top of the historical hierarchy.

Those familiar with Wagner's life know that he was a revolutionary who pushed hard for political reform. His pamphlets were read by many, and he was quite heavily involved in the Dresden insurrection that came to a head in 1848-9, so much so that he was forced to flee for his life when the Prussian army came in May 1849. Suddenly, one of the greatest and most in-demand composers of the day, as well as one of the most patriotic Germans, was a political criminal who wouldn't return to his *Vaterland* for over a decade.⁷¹

In the more than five years following his flight, Wagner didn't write any music. He did publish books, journals, pamphlets and articles of all of his political and social ideas, as well as keep journals of his dramatic ideas, though. He decided *Siegfried's*

⁷¹ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

Death needed a preface (*Young Siegfried*), then the preface needed a preface (*Siegmond and Sieglinde*), and then the preface's preface needed a preface (*The Theft of the Rheingold*).⁷²

Even though the first years of his exile saw him in sickness and extreme depression to the point of contemplating suicide, Wagner still completed the libretto for the *Ring* by 1853,⁷³ at which point he recited it to an invited audience at the Hotel Baur au Lac in Zürich. It was also during this time that his business relationship with the retired silk merchant Otto Wesendonk really blossomed, with the latter becoming one of Wagner's greatest and most well known patrons. Wesendonk's wife, Mathilde, also became another one of Wagner's lovers, furthering Wagner's rift between him and his wife, Minna, as well as adding to the marital strife between the Wesendonks. This affair was actually inspiration for the relationship between Tristan and Isolde. Wagner was eventually forced to leave the house Wesendonk provided him in Zürich.⁷⁴

Wagner never put a decisive end to his and Minna's broken marriage, despite his many female admirers. Rather, he brought her to Dresden and provided her with a respectable allowance to live. They last met in 1862 and she died in 1866. In the meantime, Wagner moved from lavish residence to lavish residence, bestowing upon his friends and acquaintances gifts and hospitality of a royal caliber, no matter the cost or

⁷² Lee, M. Owen, *Wagner's Ring: Turning the Sky Round: An Introduction to The Ring of the Nibelung* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 25.

⁷³ An interesting side note is that Verdi produced both *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* this same year.

⁷⁴ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

whether or not he had the finances. He actually was made to leave by the Viennese authorities in March 1864 because his ever-mounting debt was so extraordinary.⁷⁵

Ludwig II ascended the Bavarian throne this very same month. The 18-year-old monarch eventually forgave all of Wagner's debts and provided him a salary equal to that of a ministerial councilor so that he would be able to continue his work. Ludwig II also made the first Bayreuth Festivals of 1876 and 1882 possible.⁷⁶ Until he stepped in, things were looking pretty bleak.

The premier of the *Ring* was originally planned for the summer of 1873. However, due to financial constrictions, it was pushed back to no earlier than the summer of 1874.⁷⁷ Wagner knew this, so he didn't rush to finish his composition. The first part of the complete score was published by B. Schott's Söhne in Mainz in August of 1873, with a "launching event" in Bayreuth on August 2. However, Wagner did not actually complete the entire score until November of 1874.⁷⁸

Wagner feared that the entire project was going to be a failure, and even published his thoughts in an open letter, saying that he was about to deem the entire project a failure. However, a man by the name of Emil Heckel, who will be discussed in more depth in the Wagner Societies section, continued to work to ensure the project was going to happen, making it almost possible to premier it in 1875. Still, the finances just

⁷⁵ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

⁷⁶ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

⁷⁷ Fricke, Richard, *Wagner in Rehearsal 1875-1876: The Diaries of Richard Fricke*, trans. George R. Fricke, ed. James Deaville and Evan Baker (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1998), 8.

⁷⁸ Fricke, 9.

weren't available, and the premier was postponed yet another year.⁷⁹ It is sometime after this point that Ludwig II becomes the gracious patron and makes everything possible, thereby securing both the *Ring* and his name in history.

Meanwhile, in 1874 and amidst all of this financial strife, Wagner began recruiting the artists he deemed best suited for the premier. He had made a journey to Dessau in 1872 for the express purpose of finding a group of artists to fill the necessary positions, and now he began contacting them. One such artist was ballet master Richard Fricke, whose relationship to Wagner and the *Ring* will be discussed more in Chapter 5.⁸⁰

WAGNER SOCIETIES

Mounting grand opera is expensive when done in a way that lives up to the genre's name. Productions such as *Aida*, *Les Huguenots*, and *Turandot* require armies of people, hundreds of costumes, enormous sets and seemingly endless stage properties (not to mention exotic wildlife for a grand march done right!). Multiply this by four, and you can imagine the forces required to mount a full *Ring* cycle. Suddenly, finding performers and musicians takes a back seat to the financial woes that are about to begin. For Wagner, go ahead and add on the construction of a brand new theater to the already high overhead.

In order to raise the 300,000 thalers required for the construction of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and three complete festival seasons of the *Ring*, Wagner decided to go the public option route. He had 1,000 Certificates of Patronage created that would be sold for 300 thalers each. For those individuals who purchased a certificate, a guaranteed seat at every performance of the three festivals was their gift of benefaction. Should three people

⁷⁹ Fricke, 9.

⁸⁰ Fricke, 9.

wish to contribute 100 thalers each to purchase a Certificate, then each person was granted one seat at one performance of his choice. Now, 100 thalers was a quite sizeable sum at the time, especially for only one performance, and many couldn't afford to pay it. One such person was a Mannheim citizen by the name of Emil Heckel.

Emil Heckel was a great devotee of Wagner's art. He wanted to have a good chance of attending the festival, so he gathered a group of 35 people. Each person within this group would put five florins into a kitty yearly for 1871, 1872 and 1873. By then, the total would equal the 300 thalers required to purchase one Certificate of Patronage. Then, three members' names would be drawn from a random lottery, and they would each be given one of the performance tickets. Thus, the very first Wagner Society was born.

The public found out about this and reacted so favorably to the idea that Wagner societies were soon founded in Vienna, Munich and Leipzig. In a response to a proposal by Heckel, a central agency called the German Wagner Society was formed, and groups in many other cities soon bought into it. By April 1874, there were already twenty-five member societies in major cities around the world, including New York.⁸¹

Many such societies still exist today. New York's Society is going stronger than ever, even though the original society was disbanded at some point and the current one is a 20th century creation. Their directives are much more along the lines of "Wagner Appreciation" now, rather than fundraising to attend performances.⁸²

⁸¹ Fricke, 6-7.

⁸² Wagner Society of New York, Home Page, <http://www.wagnersocietyny.org> (accessed June 15, 2013).

THE ROAD TO BAYREUTH

Wagner was a huge proponent of a new German national operatic style—one that took the work of Weber and Marschner and further refined it in the German forge. He opined the lack of good German singers and was not alone in the opinion that Germany was suffering culturally and patriotically because of the weak operatic state. This may seem to be a bit of an over exaggeration, but it is important to remember that opera was the main vehicle of the day to present political, ethical, moral, religious and social beliefs. Operas were highly scrutinized by the critics, as well as the monarchs, so as to maintain a peaceful atmosphere among the people. After all, if the people are peaceful, protests and riots will not happen.

Not afraid of a good riot himself, Wagner believed very strongly that he could not only help find Germany find its operatic voice, but actually create it. We see very strong German patriotism and much political allegory in his works. This wasn't enough for him, though. He sought to establish a school of music in Munich that focused on German music and drama. The people wouldn't allow it, though, because they thought it less of a patriotic gesture and more of an opportunistic venture.

Wagner's financial help from Ludwig became more of a hot button issue, as many thought Wagner was taking advantage of the monarch's beneficence. It was because of this opinion that the already bemused public became hostile when they learned that Ludwig II funded the premier of *Tristan* at the Hof- und Nationaltheater.⁸³ The public's view did not come from thin air, though. Despite his brutal frankness and his racist and revolution-gearred writings, Wagner was very good at winning over people. He was able

⁸³ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

to do so with Ludwig, resulting in a nineteen-year relationship that bore witness to the changing of hands of almost 563,000 marks.⁸⁴ All of this was for the sake of Wagner's art. His art was just very expensive.

As was mentioned earlier, Wagner lived in the best of homes, with the finest clothing and the highest cuisine. One wonders why there was a need for such extravagance. The answer is simple: Wagner believed that the quality of his art directly reflected his quality of life. He was known to wear silks and satins, all created by very fine tailors. He also hosted countless soirées with endless food and free-flowing libations. The people in Munich were not at all happy with this, and Ludwig's association with the profligate was costing both of them popular support.⁸⁵

Ludwig wanted to construct a festival house for Wagner's productions in Munich. He even brought in the renowned architect Gottfried Semper to create it. However, local vested interests strongly opposed it. Combined protests from Ludwig's cabinet secretary and prime minister, the court and the general populace decidedly quashed this cultural endeavor. Furthermore, public opinion was decreasing so much that Ludwig had to ask Wagner to leave Munich in 1865. He and Cosima (who was still married to conductor Hans von Bülow, despite the fact that she and Wagner had an illegitimate child together, their daughter Isolde) moved to a house named Tribschen on Lake Lucerne.⁸⁶

During these following years, the Wagner household saw many important events. Wagner and Cosima's second and third children, Eva and Siegfried, were born in 1867

⁸⁴ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

⁸⁵ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

⁸⁶ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

and 1869. Cosima had meanwhile petitioned to Bülow for a divorce, and he acquiesced. The couple were eventually married on August 25, 1870. Finally, despite Wagner's desire to have the entire *Ring* performed together as a festival, Ludwig insisted that Munich see the premiers of *Das Rheingold* (1869) and *Die Walküre* (1870).⁸⁷

Wagner came to settle upon the Upper Franconian town of Bayreuth to be the home for his festival opera house. He quickly began securing both public and official support. He also began gaining support from other patrons, both within Germany and from other countries. Then, on May 22, 1872, Wagner was able to celebrate his birthday with the laying of the cornerstone and a concert of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*.

He and Cosima lived in a temporary home until 1874, at which time they moved into their newly-built villa, Wahnfried.⁸⁸ The flurry of activity that soon ensued was truly remarkable. Artistic staff began arriving, including stage director and choreographer Richard Fricke in the spring of 1875, and the father-and-son scenic construction team of Carl and Fritz Brandt from Darmstadt. These two men were able to design and work with the machinery Wagner desired for the sets. The Brückner brothers from Coburn were hired to take care of the "decorations" of the set, creating them according to the design by Hoffmann, the court painter from Vienna. Dr. Doepler, Senior was entrusted with costume design.⁸⁹

Wagner required all of his singers to be present in May of 1875 for piano rehearsals, then again in August for sixteen days of orchestra reads. The orchestra

⁸⁷ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

⁸⁸ Oxford Music Online, "Richard Wagner"

⁸⁹ Fricke, 9-12.

numbered no less than one hundred fourteen players. They included players from Berlin, Meiningen, Dessau, Vienna, Munich and Weimar.⁹⁰ In short, Bayreuth was a veritable beehive of musical and creative activity.

The festival premier of the *Ring* was unlike anything the world had ever seen in terms of size, scope and sheer forces (both human and financial). There were many new things, but the most important innovation didn't actually come from the opera itself. Rather, Wagner's design of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus completely revolutionized opera house construction in terms of orchestra pit positioning. He set the orchestra much deeper under the stage, and put a cover over it so that the players were not easily seen by the audience. Not only did it make it much easier to hear the singers over such a large orchestra, but it further engulfed the audience in the drama onstage, thus turning it into what the artists of the *avant garde* (had they been present) would consider a "happening," rather than simply a typical performance. Furthermore, in hiding the orchestra, Wagner actually reduced the size of the fourth wall, effectually creating a much more intimate atmosphere by bringing the audience even closer to the action onstage.

What began as a political allegory became one of the most impressive works of art the world has ever (dare I say *will* ever?) experienced. The innovations and sheer orchestration of forces were incredible, especially for the era in which it was mounted. The *Ring* further defined Germanic opera and provided a source of patriotic pride for the German people. All of this was amidst great financial struggles and much uncertainty as to the possibility of actually being able to mount the festival. In a way, though, this

⁹⁰ Fricke, 13.

struggle only further stood as an example of German persistence and perseverance, thus making Wagner's magnum opus even more successful.

CHAPTER 5

THE MUSIC AND DRAMA: WHAT WAGNER *REALLY* INTENDED AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

[Wagner's] most startling inspirations seemed to us though drawn from some hidden deep layer; often it was as though a veil were removed and one had the sudden glimpse of a self-sufficient ideal world beyond the influence of any human will.

—Heinrich Porges in *Rehearsing the Ring*

Every professional artist knows that a wealth of information is necessary for a successful tackling of a major work. Concerning works within the operatic genre, it is of utmost importance to know the performance traditions, as well as the composer's original intentions in order to fully serve the piece. For the purposes of this chapter, I have consulted two major primary sources. Journals written first-hand by two men who worked closely with Wagner during the preparations for the premier of the *Ring*, they provide the greatest insight as to Wagner's musico-dramatic goals and desires in *Das Rheingold*. It is through these accounts that the majority of the information below has been compiled, and it is through this information that Wagner's perfect performance is revealed. Prior to getting into the actual content of these men's journals, however, it is important to know who they were and why their journals are important for this discussion.

Richard Fricke was born in Leipzig in 1810. As an adult, he was employed by the Grand Duke in Dessau to be the ballet master at his court theater. It was while in this capacity that Wagner first became aware of Fricke and his work. Wagner travelled to Dessau in 1872 with the explicit purpose of finding singers to recruit for the premier of

the *Ring* in Bayreuth. While there, Wagner went to the theater's December 11 production of Gluck's *Orfeo*, which featured a rich choreographic concept by Fricke. Wagner absolutely fell in love with the production, and wrote the following testimony in his article "Ein Einblick in das heutige deutschen Opernwesen:"

I publicly avow I have never witnessed a more noble and more perfect theater performance than this production. Obviously, the misfortune suffered by the intendant in the diminution of the cast actually contributed to the success of the performance, for it seems impossible that a large and more complete cast could have achieved the same excellent results as exhibited by the two female singers of Orpheus and Euridice. At any rate, although by no means gifted singers, these two artists were inspired by such a noble spirit and sense of artistic sympathy with the roles, as I had never expected to discover in such a unified and beautiful performance of Gluck's lovely creation. In this performance, everything was in such perfect harmony that I can state without fear of contradiction that the perfection of this performance was brought about by the graceful beauty of the whole stage presentation. Here, the theater scenery became a fundamental element of the whole in its continuously animating contribution. Every facet of stage life, the grouping, the artful scenery, the lighting, every action, even that of walking across the stage, helped create this ideal mystification, which envelops us in a dawning imagining, in a prophetic dreaming of that which we have never experienced.... And all this, as mentioned, in the little town of Dessau.⁹¹

Wagner quickly went to the orchestra during intermission and praised everyone on a job well done. The next day, still amazed by the preceding evening's performance, Wagner returned to the theater and met with the intendant on the stage where they were rehearsing *Der fliegende Holländer*. He introduced himself to Fricke, at which point he told Fricke and those present about his plans for the *Ring's* premier at Bayreuth, urging

⁹¹ Fricke, Richard, *Wagner in Rehearsal 1875-1876: The Diaries of Richard Fricke*, trans. George R. Fricke, ed. James Deaville and Evan Baker (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1988), 4.

them to all be a part of it—especially Fricke, even though there wasn't a dance or ballet planned for any of the operas.⁹²

Thus began a lifelong friendship between the two men. Fricke eventually accepted Wagner's offer (after many consecutive letters from the composer, each of which being more aggressively persuasive) and was slated to be a part of the Bayreuth premier. Over the coming years, he became very close to the entire family, eventually giving the Wagner children dance lessons. Yet, despite this close relationship, Fricke really seems to give an accurate and unbiased portrayal of the events leading up to the *Ring*'s premier within the pages of his diaries. Therefore, this account lends great truthful insight into good and the not so good elements of the preparation process.

The second contributor, Heinrich Porges, was born in Prague on Nov. 25, 1837. He studied music and philosophy and was a prominent German writer on music. In 1863, he became co-editor of Leipzig's *Neue Zeitschrift von Musik*, then became the editor of Munich's *Süddeutsche Presse* in 1867 and then functioned as the music critic for *Neueste Nachrichten* from 1880 onwards. Besides writing, Porges wore the hat of piano teacher at the Royal Music School for some time, and in 1886, he founded the Porges Choral Society "which besides works by Bach and Palestrina devoted itself especially to those of Berlioz, Liszt, Cornelius and Bruckner."⁹³

Porges and Wagner became friends during Wagner's tenure in Vienna. Their relationship really blossomed in 1864. Robert L. Jacobs, the man who translated Porges' account of the *Ring*'s premier, puts it best:

⁹² Fricke, pg. 5

⁹³ Porges, Heinrich, *Wagner: Rehearsing the 'Ring,'* trans. Robert L. Jacobs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ix

In 1864 the relationship between the two developed rapidly. Porges was one of the friends who arranged the sale of Wagner's effects after he fled from his creditors in Vienna; later that year, when his fortunes were changed overnight by King Ludwig of Bavaria, Wagner invited Porges not only to come to Munich as his private secretary, but to live there with him: 'How important for me and how beautiful always to have your understanding, friendly companionship!' But Porges preferred to devote his pen to Wagner's cause—to co-edit the Wagner-orientated *Süddeutsche Press*, write a piece on *Lohengrin*, performed in Munich in 1867, and an essay on *Tristan* (published posthumously in 1906). In 1869, when *Das Rheingold* was produced in Munich against Wagner's wishes and critics praised the performance and damned the work, Porges wrote, so Cosima told Nietzsche, 'some beautiful, profound words of great congeniality' [sic] In 1872 an article on Wagner's ceremonial performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* at the laying of the foundation-stone of the Festival Theatre gave Wagner the idea of commissioning him to record the rehearsals of the *Ring*.⁹⁴

Wagner never forgot their close relationship. Neither did Wagner's wife Cosima, for Porges was just as faithful a friend to her and the children as he was to the family's patriarch. Even during occasions when great negative energy was focused upon the composer, Porges remained true to them. As their son Siegfried so eloquently stated in his oration at Porges' funeral, "As he stood by my father's side, so, like a faithful Eckhart, he stood by my mother's... when visibility was poor and some vessels sailed blindly hither and thither, friend Porges put his trust in the compass of his convictions."⁹⁵

As Porges was so faithful in furthering the family's cause, Wagner wanted to include him in the premier in a way that not only furthered the careers of both composer and critic, but that served all of music history. On Nov. 6, 1872, Wagner wrote the following to Porges in a letter:

⁹⁴ Porges, x.

⁹⁵ Porges, xi.

I have you in mind for a task in which will be of the greatest importance to the future of my enterprise. I want you to follow all my rehearsals very closely... and to note down everything I say, even the smallest details, about the interpretation and performance of our work, so that a tradition goes down in writing.⁹⁶

This account of Wagner's wishes and of the premier of the *Ring* is unbelievably precise and truthful. Porges was very honest in his writing and did not simply trumpet Wagner's heroic, infallible image, much the way every biography—as well as Wagner's autobiography—did at that time. Rather, he mentions times when Wagner was difficult or gave the performers and/or artistic staff some grief. The most important feature of these memoirs, however, is the view provided of the innermost workings of Wagner's artistic dreams.

Most people think of Wagner as a megalomaniacal perfectionist. While this is largely true of his personality, it doesn't reveal anything of his artistic persona. Rather, Wagner sought truth in art. His ultimate goal was to attain *Überwirklichkeit*, which translates as "super reality."⁹⁷ In other words, he wished to transcend the boundaries of fact and fiction, not blurring the line but destroying it altogether. His gods portray virtually every human emotion and characteristic, both good and evil. His depictions of nature are not only in keeping with the German Romantic ideal, they serve to simultaneously paint the picture of and establish the perfect atmosphere for each scene's setting.

This description of Wagner's artistic ideals is the perfect transition in this sonata form-like chapter from the exposition section of historical background into the

⁹⁶ Porges, vii.

⁹⁷ Porges, 4.

development section of the actual content found within the pages of these accounts. Now, as many who are familiar with Wagner and his personality already know, he was a man who was very exacting in his operatic creations. His attention to detail did not merely pertain to the music itself, though, but to the entire finished product. The *Ring* serves as *the* paradigm for this statement. While he was very much concerned about every detail of his previous works, Wagner took great pains to seek out the perfect group of people to make up the onstage performers, orchestra members and artistic staff.

Aside from vocal prowess, Wagner had very specific aesthetics in mind for the singers. In a letter to Fricke, dated May 26, 1875, Wagner asked for recommendations for “tall, deep basses for the giant Fafner, and also a very tall, high bass, with a powerful voice, for Donner.”⁹⁸ At times, physical aesthetics even took precedence over vocal ability (Might we be seeing this happening today at a certain large opera house based out of Manhattan’s Lincoln Center...?), as is evidenced in his July 12, 1875 letter to Fricke:

I need a selection of excellent choral voices, and in this I place particular importance on an imposing figure and a confident stage presence: special experience as a singer is less necessary. I need them as the vassals in the second and third acts of *Götterdämmerung*. I do not need a great number of them, but I do demand of every actor that he should be able to portray his character.... I am especially low in tenors.... I would also like some women of fine appearance—these would have to sing only individual interjections. Their voices are not so important. More important is secure stage presence and dignified action in exciting scenes.⁹⁹

Many may consider this abhorrent to the art of singing. However, it is important to understand the impetus behind these requests. Already described is the idea of *Überwirklichkeit*, as well as the strong emphasis on nature in German Romantic works.

⁹⁸ Fricke, 15.

⁹⁹ Fricke, 15.

Wagner didn't stop there. He wanted performers who had great stage presence because those were the artists who fit the ideal he considered "the basis of all dramatic talent"—*Selbstentäußerung* (self-abandonment).¹⁰⁰

Wagner himself possessed a great talent of being able to transform into virtually any role, thereby making it possible to very effectively demonstrate what he wanted from every performer, much as Shakespeare did. In fact, Wagner was a great connoisseur of Shakespeare's works and principles. This is apparent in his directions, which shared the same basic principle as Shakespearean drama: *mimisch-dramatisch Natürlichkeit* (mimic-dramatic naturalness).¹⁰¹ He further made his art unique by blending this Shakespearean style with the idealistic style of antique tragedy, bringing about a combination of art that is highly stylized in order to directly embody an ideal and an art that is faithfully rooted in nature.¹⁰²

Now, in order to further understand the Wagnerian aesthetic, it is important to know more about the German style. The essential feature of genuine German dramatic-musical art is that:

in articulation and in characterization everything must appear authentic and natural. There must never be any suggestion of false pathos or mannerism; even the most violent outbursts of passion must possess what Schiller so aptly termed a forceful beauty (*energischen Schönheit*). This heroic element, this character of powerful masculinity, was present in all the many instructions Wagner gave in order to secure a correct and vital performance. To witness his style of dramatic-musical performance was to feel infused by an invigorating force. What struck one above all was the sheer strength of his vitality and, bound up with this, that wonderful capacity for flexible accurate representation (*plastisch bestimmtester*

¹⁰⁰ Porges, 2-3.

¹⁰¹ Porges, 3.

¹⁰² Porges, 4-5.

Gestaltung) which is evident in all his creations and the ruling principle of their performance, affecting equally the mimetic action, the articulation of the words, the musical expression of the emotions and the execution of the symphonic passages.¹⁰³

So, what does this mean to the performer who is approaching this role? To begin, the most palpable difference between what Wagner wanted and what we tend to see on the stages throughout the world (during more conventional productions, that is) is an active portrayal. The clichéd image of Wagnerian opera is a robust man or woman wearing a horned helmet and wielding a spear, standing stock-still and belting out the loudest notes he or she can muster. What we *should* be expecting, however, is a vibrant, living, breathing, organic experience that actually draws us into the action, not one that simply holds us at arm's length so that we may marvel at the sounds coming from the stage and pit, but that doesn't really require us to keep our eyes open and focused.

Still, there is a very narrow line that must be walked between visual and auditory considerations. Furthermore, while visual drama was certainly of utmost importance to Wagner, so, too, was musical integrity. Despite his emphasis on visual aesthetics, he strongly felt that the music *must* be served in a proper fashion.¹⁰⁴ This is evidenced in his choice of the Lehmann sisters, Lilli and Marie, to make up two-thirds of the Rheinmaiden trio. Furthermore, he wrote extremely specific dynamics, note values, orchestrations and directions, both musical and dramatic, which are all included in a good score. Amusingly, this was actually done in much the same way Verdi did, even though neither one liked the other's music.

¹⁰³ Porges, 4.

¹⁰⁴ The reader should consult Chapter 1 in order to help determine whether or not he is ready or even suited to serving this role at the highest level.

A remark made by Wagner that not only supports this, but that actually impacts every performance aspect of the *Ring* as a whole, is as follows:

When the motive is depicting an actual event it should be delivered in a grand style, slowly and broadly, but when serving as a reminiscence—as for example in Sieglinde’s narration—it should be slightly faster and with accents less pointed—as it were, in the throwaway style of an experience actor delivering an interpolated sentence.¹⁰⁵

A perfect example is the opening scene between Wotan and Fricke (the beginning of Scene 2). The downbeat is the beginning of the first iteration of the Valhalla motive. While it is written in a very strong and stately triple meter, it is intended to be withheld at the beginning.¹⁰⁶ His choice of instrumentation—three tenor tubas, three bass tubas, a contrabass trombone, and a contrabass tuba playing the melody over plucked harp(s) and tremolo low strings—immediately evokes a sense of quiet dignity. Even when the orchestration expands to the full detail, the dynamics are kept within the range of *pianissimo* to *mezzo-forte*. There is one hairpin that grows from the single *mezzo-forte* section, but it serves to allow the sound to expand and not simply to give the orchestra an opportunity to “get loud.”

Furthermore, Wagner’s intention was that the Valhalla theme should “convey a feeling of sublime calm” and should be a “broad adagio,” with accents outlining the two-bar sections of longer periods and “a proper grading of the different dynamic levels.” These conventions combined should “bring out the inner dramatic development” of the

¹⁰⁵ Porges, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Wagner has given the instruments either *piano* or *pianissimo* markings and has provided the direction *Ruhiges Zeitmass* (literally “quiet time scale”), which indicates that the tempo should never be pushed at this moment.

theme, which should be thought of as the *Ring*'s principal musical theme.¹⁰⁷ Should the conductor have a different opinion, it bears a respectful conversation of the possibility of adhering closely to Wagner's wishes, as a change, no matter how subtle, can greatly alter the dramatic impetus of the scene.

Everything is then interrupted by a *forte* figure played by the violas and cellos that is comprised of four thirty-second notes descending to a short, accented eighth note. Immediately, Fricka comes in with an unaccompanied recitative ("Wotan, Gemahl! erwache!") that stirs Wotan in a way that mirrors the middle strings' stirring of the musical atmosphere.

Wagner was very specific in the way he wanted Wotan's reaction executed:

Wotan must start his greeting to Valhalla—that supreme example of the grand style in vocal composition—in a half-reclining position; at 'stark und schön steht er zur Schau' he rises, and at the concluding 'hehrer, herrlicher Bau' steps towards the castle. Then, while the orchestra is delivering the final D flat major chord, he turns back and comes downstage where Fricka receives him with her reproaches.¹⁰⁸

The biggest complication with these directions arises from the logistics of singing upstage to the castle. There wouldn't be much of an issue with this in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, but there would be at larger houses, such as the Met or San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House, where the orchestra is essentially in the same room as the audience. The orchestration is very thick and, as discussed in Chapter 1, this is some of Wotan's most difficult singing, as he must sing an ascending thirteenth from the middle of the voice to above the *passaggio*. Neither situation befits the action of walking

¹⁰⁷ Porges, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Porges, 12.

upstage. It is, therefore, the opinion of the author that this particular detail be downright ignored if the singer wants to make a good first impression to the audience.

Now, concerning orchestration, Wagner made it very clear that there should never be a competition between instrument and singer. Even though many people today think that the orchestra is the most important aspect of Wagner's music, Porges proves that he most definitely felt the exact opposite about the subject:

A general point of the utmost importance affecting the whole style of music-dramatic art must be considered here. [For the orchestra, there is an] imperative need to moderate dynamic expression-marks, convert fortissimos into fortes, fortes into mezzo fortes etc., in order to ensure that the singers' words and inflections make their proper impact. We must never be allowed to forget that we are attending a dramatic performance which seeks to imitate reality; we are not listening to a purely symphonic work. From which it follows that symphonic passages during which the words are being sung should become excessively loud. Wagner declared that the orchestra should support the singer as the sea does a boat, rocking but never upsetting or swamping—he employed that image over and over.¹⁰⁹

Wagner sent a very clear message to the singers, as well. It is a message that should be sent to many singers today, as it pertains to adherence to the music *as it is written*, rather than allowing the singer to simply perform it in the way he sees fit, which usually causes the singer to stray from the style characteristics that are quintessentially Wagnerian.

Singers should not be tempted thereby to lapse into a weak or perhaps even casual style; on the contrary they should try all the harder to bring out the flexible melodic and thematic contours as concisely as possible, by means of clear-cut phrasing and precise metric and rhythmic accents. This style of performance is absolutely necessary since it is only thus that the combination of the different forms of speech-melody and orchestral melody can be grasped simultaneously.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Porges, 12-13.

¹¹⁰ Porges, 13.

Wagner took great pains to champion effective and realistic diction and speech. According to him, Rheingold is “the portion of the *Ring* furthest removed from old-style opera” and its chief constituent was “monologue cast in the form of arias with a succession of soliloquies.”¹¹¹ He further maintained that the dialogue must be delivered at the speed of normal speech.¹¹² As Porges wrote, “... in Wagner’s works the pace of every syllable is determined by note-values; the performer has only to articulate the rhythmic structure accurately and the expression of the musical speech will be right.”¹¹³

In other words, Wagner’s dramatic dialogue *must* be understood, lest his works become devoid of dramatic meaning. On a further note, the singer will easily master Wagner’s style if he, in addition to learning the abovementioned speech imitation, becomes able to “sense—absorb—the harmonic basis” of Wagner’s “new art of speech-melody combining clarity of diction with emotional warmth and vitality.”¹¹⁴

Another ingenious way Wagner shapes the phrases musically and draws attention to specific lines of text lies in his mix of triple and duple time; more specifically, his use of triplets. He considered the triplet to be the slowest of all the musical figures, as they were created out of syncopation.¹¹⁵ Therefore, careful attention must be paid to the execution of these figures. It would be highly inappropriate for the musical style and

¹¹¹ Porges, 13-14.

¹¹² Porges, 14.

¹¹³ Porges, 14.

¹¹⁴ Porges, 14.

¹¹⁵ Porges, 22.

dramatic intensity to become lazy or sloppy with them and turn them into nothing more than swung eighth notes.

While certainly not exhaustive of all of the details within Wagner's style, all of these examples create a valid, fact-based argument against those who claim that Wagnerian singing is merely controlled screaming. When executed properly, it is some of the most complex, detail-oriented music ever written. It is a shame that so many performers fail to heed his musical cues and simply hold out notes or change dynamic nuances because they feel good.

Furthermore, this is not vital information for only the singer; it is a necessity for *everyone* involved in the process—orchestra, coaches and especially the conductor. This section also dispels the common misconception concerning loud voices vs. *powerful* voices. As long as a voice has that certain dramatic edge and can successfully carry the hall, it should be sufficient. Granted, a smaller voice would definitely be an inappropriate choice, but voices should not all be pushed and forced to attempt to match the largest voices (e.g. Nilsson and Salminen).

Let us turn the discussion back to the initial dialogue between Wotan and Fricka at the beginning of Scene 2. This is a perfect example of *Naturwarheit*, or the bringing of fidelity to nature into opera. Anyone who is acquainted with married couples will recognize some truth in this relationship. Granted, this union is obviously not of the healthiest variety, as issues of nagging and infidelity enter the conversation. However, the way the two speak to each other truly reflects their long-term relationship status. This

scene also exhibits the way “calmness and grandeur of expression are possible without any sacrifice of natural feeling.”¹¹⁶

An intense calm must remain within Wotan for quite some time. His first response to Fasolt (“Nennt, Leute, den Lohn...”) should be “‘quite abrupt’ (*kurz abgebrochen*) and casual,” providing the necessary contrast for Fasolt’s disbelief and shock at Wotan’s refusal to hand over Freia. This point-blank refusal (“Seid ihr bei Trost...”) should be just that, as it is the statement that really sets off the giants.¹¹⁷ Wotan must continue in the same way throughout the entire interaction with the giants—even when Froh and Donner enter so that Fasolt’s line can grow through the expression of fear that arises from this calm.

The moment Wotan places his spear between Donner and Fasolt, thus ending the entire argument, should be done with an imperious gesture that has a great visual effect; one that matches the musical effect.¹¹⁸ Wotan’s ending of the argument is sung over the Treaty motif. Wagner wanted this motif to be delivered in a way that not only is easily grasped by the audience, but so that the force of the initial 6/4 G Major chord is still in the audience’s ears at the end of the over-two-octave descent. Furthermore, he wanted a moderate tempo so that Wotan’s entire pronouncement and concluding words to Donner are speech-like in nature.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Porges, 14.

¹¹⁷ Porges, 17.

¹¹⁸ Porges, 19.

¹¹⁹ Porges, 20.

Finally, Loge arrives, with his approach signaled by his fiery motif. The ensuing flurry of emotional and dramatic activity is so fast-paced (well, for Wagner, that is) and Wotan is supposed to see him (offstage, of course) before this motif begins, and exclaims, “Endlich Loge!” Upon Loge’s entrance, Wotan and he shouldn’t be close together until Wotan delivers the words, “Da einst die Bauer der Burg zum, Dank Freia begehrten.”—seventy-five measures after Loge’s motif begins. Loge should keep this distance as much as Wotan should.¹²⁰

Some 112 measures after Loge’s entrance, the god Donner turns violent toward him, saying he will snuff him out (“Verflüchte Lohe, dich lösche ich aus!”). Loge quickly and sharply retorts that it is merely to cover his own shame that Donner would reproach him (“Ihre Schmach zu decken, schmähen mich Dumme!”), which only adds sap-filled mesquite to Donner’s emotional fire. It is at this moment that the singer portraying Wotan *must* be paying close attention, for he is responsible for stopping Donner’s fatal strike with his hammer, doing so with “a protective movement of the arm.”¹²¹

Conversely, as Loge tells his story trying to find a replacement for Freia as payment for the giants, each god should express the astonishment and embarrassment it causes, and should do so in a way that is fitting of their character. Then, as he tells about the Rheingold and reaches the end of the part of the tale about its theft, the gods “must make involuntary movements and exchange glances as though under a spell.”¹²² Finally, as Loge tells the part of the tale that concerns the Ring and the fact that it gives its owner

¹²⁰ Porges, 21.

¹²¹ Porges, 21.

¹²² Porges, 22.

power over the whole world, it should elicit another large, intense reaction, but it should be different from the previous reaction. It should be mentioned that, while rehearsing this section of the opera, Wagner exclaimed, as if just realizing the importance this moment has on the entire 4-opera drama, “So mighty an object is the Nibelung’s ring!”¹²³

Loge must direct the line that says the only person who can forge such a ring is one who renounces love directly at Wotan, who needs to angrily cross away from Loge at this point. Wotan then exclaims that he must have the Ring (“Der Ring muss ich haben!”), which must be executed with an emphatic gesture in order to accomplish the desired effect.¹²⁴

There are many instances such as these throughout the opera that call for some sort of immediate reaction from Wotan. Whether it be a strong physical movement, a more internalized and dreary reaction to some foreboding message, or anything in between, it is absolutely vital for Wotan to know what every single character is saying at every moment after his initial entrance in Scene 2. If the singer is clueless, the performance as a whole will greatly suffer.

After Wotan’s desirous outburst for the Ring, all of the gods begin thinking about owning this item and the power it would grant the one who wields it. Fricka makes her plea to Wotan, for she would like to have the gold adorn her body, not to mention she would surely use it to keep him chaste and true to her. The giants also begin mulling over the power of the Ring. “As Wotan stands silently struggling with himself while the other gods eye him in suspense and Fasolt and Fafner consult aside, Wagner illuminated the

¹²³ Porges, 22-23.

¹²⁴ Porges, 23.

meaning of the situation with the remark that now for the first time the gods realize that another power exists besides their own, namely the power of gold.”¹²⁵

Once Fafner convinces Fasolt that, along with the entire Nibelung hoard, the Ring would be an apt replacement for Freia as payment for completing Valhalla, they drag her off with them as a ransom. While they exit with her, the gods must watch with agitated helplessness.¹²⁶ Once she is out of sight, they immediately feel the effect of age and fatigue creeping into their bodies. She is, remember, the one who tends the orchard of golden apples that guarantee the gods’ immortality. As Porges recorded, the gods must begin to grow “increasingly old and pallid.” The audience should be able to feel that “

the blood in the veins of the gods is beginning to course more slowly, that their pulses are starting to slacken; one is an anguished spectator of an inexorable process threatening the gods, casting its shadow before. The deep significance of all this was pin-pointed symbolically by Wagner’s direction that Wotan must stand with his spear lowered, its tip pointing down.”¹²⁷

(This gesture could also possibly be perceived as a symbolic loss of Wotan’s virility, as this is the first time he is really powerless in a situation.)

Special attention must be given to Loge’s ensuing speech and Fricka’s lament to Wotan so that the appropriate gestures and body language are present from every character, thereby unifying the dramatic trajectory. In Wagner’s words, the “underlying principle was that stage action (*mimische Aktion*) should have the quality of living sculpture.” This being said, the goal was not to make attractive stage pictures, but to mimic reality and its fluidity of movement and perpetual flux. A static stage picture that

¹²⁵ Porges, 24.

¹²⁶ Porges, 24.

¹²⁷ Porges, 25.

only served to be aesthetically pleasing was absolutely frowned upon. “We are looking not for living pictures—created and cultivated by elegant dilettantes, be it said in passing—but for a faithful, deeply felt representation of life as we experience it.”¹²⁸

More specifically, the following must be deliberated when addressing this scene:

Nevertheless, in the course of a drama there are moments when scenic effects border on the pictorial—moments when after some decisive happening the action seems to be slowing down and the situation appears to be one of relative stillness. Then it is as much the scenic designer’s function to aid the dramatist by providing a significant and gripping spectacle as it is the composer’s to reveal the inner meaning of the situation. As Wagner cogently put it in his preface to *The Ring of the Nibelung*, the determining factor in the art of music-drama is that we are ‘confronted by a scenic representation in which music and poetic drama combine to form a whole in every tiny detail’... The scene in *Das Rheingold* we have been considering provides an example of a situation in which the criteria of plastic art exercise a direct influence on the stage picture. Because the giants have borne Freia away the gods immediately begin to lose their glowing youthful splendour. [sic] As the music expresses the feeling of mortality, so the positioning and gestures of the actors must convey their feeling of being in the grip of a magical spell threatening their lives. They group themselves around Wotan who stands brooding, eyes downcast, his spear lowered, its tip pointing downwards (as I have said). They look at him, waiting anxiously. The sense of oppression weighing upon them all is only broken when he announces his sudden decision to journey down to Nibelheim for the gold. His parting words, so full of confidence—‘Ihr andern harrt bis Abend hier: verlorn’er Jugend erjag ich erlösendes Gold!’—were deeply moving: the passage was declaimed with such grandeur and with such glowing warmth that now one felt the spell was lifted. The overall effect was marvellously [sic] unified, the main reason for this being the perfect co-ordination of the music and the dramatic and scenic spectacle.¹²⁹

As we see from this record, the attention to detail is expected from every contributor in the process. The stage picture evoked from the other gods and the sets themselves must invite the audience into this forlorn world, rather than simply provide a

¹²⁸ Porges, 25-26.

¹²⁹ Porges, 25-26.

visual representation of the event, as was done in the early twentieth century with the use of *tableau vivants*. Further, the actors and actresses absolutely *must* know the musical and poetic cues of this scene. Should this not be the case, then Wotan is left “out to dry,” acting to a group of unfeeling statues.

Still, while Wagner was very exacting in his vision and wishes for the execution of said vision, he was most delighted “when a singer hit on the right way of his own accord, so that the dramatic art-work gave the impression of a self-created, living, breathing organism.”¹³⁰ After all, he strove for a “continuous tense energy” whose flow must never be broken by anything which was not motivated by the situation, such as hesitation or lingering.¹³¹ As Porges put it:

[Wagner’s] most startling inspirations seemed to us as though drawn from some hidden deep layer; often in was as though a veil were removed and one had the sudden glimpse of a self-sufficient ideal world beyond the influence of any human will.¹³²

We further see this through the way Wagner viewed the Ring (object, not cycle) itself and the characteristics he bestowed upon it. He transformed an object from merely that to a being that evoked “a malignant and at the same time base and common nature consumed by lust for power.”¹³³ Yet, is this really the case, or does its power feed upon these traits that are already present in each individual who deigns to possess it up until Siegfried, who is heroism and good incarnate, and then Brünnhilde, who is purity

¹³⁰ Porges, 29.

¹³¹ Porges, 29.

¹³² Porges, 29.

¹³³ Porges, 29.

incarnate and possesses true strength of character while lacking the weakness of being male?

Looking upon it thusly, we are suddenly confronted with a potential allegory that posits the idea of women being stronger than men in life's more difficult and pivotal situations. In other words, men are the stronger, more dominant sex in the everyday world, especially during warfare. Yet, when it comes to the occasions when life as one knows it is about to be changed for the rest of his or her mortal days, or even for all eternity, brave, virtuous women are the only ones truly equipped with the "stuff" it takes to finish the job the right way. (I cannot help but think of the act of childbirth as being analogous within our modern frame of reference.)

The most interesting aspect of this theory is that it flies directly in the face of absolutely everything that Wagner believed, not to mention the way he acted. Could it be that this was what he really believed, yet refused to allow it into his public dealings and persona? This guide has shown the way he utilized the myths and changed them to suit his purpose. He could have very easily made it so that the ultimate savior of the world was a man—*but he didn't*. By all rights, the king of the gods, the All-father of creation, should be the real hero. Yet, not only does he immediately fall prey to the curse of the Ring, but he finally loses when his grandson defeats him in battle and breaks his spear with his sword, left only to wander for the rest of his days until fate allows him to be destroyed.

The reader may be wondering why such a tangent about characters and situations that don't even appear in this opera is important. The answer is simple. A successful portrayal of this interpretation will completely change the direction of the rest of the

cycle. Kobbé is proven utterly incorrect in his assertion that is quoted at the beginning of Chapter 3. Wotan is not an idiot. Rather, he is brilliant in that he has assessed his own weakness and that of his future male offspring and has found that they cannot possibly be victorious. His daughter, however, can be.

I have not come across a single performance that even remotely takes this direction. Even the “insane” productions—such as the one at the 2013 Bayreuth festival that set *Götterdämmerung* in a trailer park in the middle of Texas—do not present an interpretation that is even remotely close to this one. They all portray the characters in the exact same way that they have always been portrayed, which negates the “new” takes on the *Ring*. This is so very disappointing. Think about the depth of character that is possible when such an unorthodox *real* interpretation¹³⁴ is a main impetus for the entire cycle. Whether or not the performer chooses to take this route, it is nevertheless another dramatic layer to consider when building and shaping Wotan.

Upon Alberich’s re-entrance, whipping the Nibelung slaves who are loaded with the treasure, Wotan must help set the striking difference between the ruler of the gods and the evil Nibelung by delivering his speech (“Von Nibelheim’s nächt’ gem Land...”) with extremely calm self-assurance. “The calm self-control of the ruler of the gods forms a doubly effective contrast to the savage passion of the prince of the Nibelungs. One must guard here against the temptation to drag, created by the double basses’ and cellos’ bare triads.”

¹³⁴ I fail to recognize change for the sake of being change as an interpretation. Rather, I see that as a half-effective director who just wants to make a name for himself in any way possible, much like Miley Cyrus at the MTV Music Awards in 2013. It is a rather pathetic attempt, as shock value must have an ultimate motivation that challenges us to change our views, not merely to do it for the sake of the shock-*ing*.

Wagner included very specific staging instructions in the score for the beginning of Scene 4, which he fully intended the performers to follow and wasn't merely presenting suggestions. This is a very difficult scene in that the dramatic contour contains so many facets: haughty victory in the capture and retrieval of Alberich, lustful acquisition of the Ring, ominous reticence of Alberich's cursing of it, aggression toward the giants when they drag Freia back, embarrassment as she is used as the measure for the Nibelung's hoard, foreboding concern caused by Erda's warning, fear and disgust when Fafner kills Fasolt and drags away the Ring and treasure, renewal when the storm is cleared and the *bifrost* (rainbow bridge) is created so that the gods can cross into Valhalla, guilt-driven anger when the Rheinmaidens call from the water's depths for their gold to be returned, and finally a sense of self-reassurance (albeit a bit forced) when crossing into Valhalla.¹³⁵

Many people express concern with only the difficulty in singing this role, but perhaps the largest challenge is actually in establishing and maintaining the proper dramatic foundation and progression from the beginning of Scene 2 until the end of the opera. It is a highly difficult task to be done well and the singer runs the risk of "flat-lining" the show if he doesn't spend ample time developing his character. Still, when Wotan is presented strongly, it is a character that reveals so much about not only Wagner and the expectations of men at the time, but also about oneself.

Audience members will be able to identify with a great many aspects of his character, both the good and the bad. They will be allowed the chance to turn inward and re-evaluate their own shortcomings and strengths, which is one of the first steps towards

¹³⁵ It is precisely because of this scene that the dramatic exercises were included in the first chapter.

making oneself a better person. This is such a powerful responsibility and is the reason this opera exists. It only stands to reason that the singer should not only accept this responsibility, but to really run with it, for only then will he be serving the art.

How might he go about serving the art? Reading this guide and following the exercises is a great starting place. In providing the information and creating the exercises, I have created a workbook of sorts that will do nothing less than build the singer's knowledge base and, thereby, his confidence. Likewise, should the singer not find himself fit for the role after assessment through the exercises, he has been saved from making a grave career move. Either way, this guide will have done its job. It will have, itself, served the art by educating and preparing another singer to produce the finest finished onstage product. As that is our goal as artists, so is that the goal of this guide.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fricke, Richard. *Wagner in Rehearsal 1875-1876: The Diaries of Richard Fricke*. Translated by George R. Fricke. Edited by James Deaville and Evan Baker. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1998.
- Kobbé, Gustav. *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Descriptive Analysis Containing All the Leading Motives*. Seventh Edition. New York: Schirmer, 1896.
- Larrington, Carolyne, translator. *The Poetic Edda*. Introduction and Notes by Carolyne Larrington. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Lee, M. Owen. *Wagner's Ring: Turning the Sky Round: An Introduction to The Ring of the Nibelung*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.
- Oxford Music Online, s.v. "Richard Wagner"
- Porges, Heinrich. *Wagner: Rehearsing the 'Ring.'* Translated by Robert L. Jacobs. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Sturluson, Snorri. *Edda*. Translated and edited by Anthony Faulkes. Vermont: Everyman, 1995.
- Wagner, Richard. *Das Rheingold, WWV 86A*. Piano-vocal score based on the complete edition. Mainz: Schott, 2010.
- Wagner, Richard. *Das Rheingold, WWV 86A in Full Score*. Full orchestral score is a reproduction of the 1873 edition originally published by B. Schott's Sohne, Mainz. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985.
- Wagner Society of New York, Home Page, <http://www.wagnersocietyny.org> (accessed June 15, 2013).

Discography

Cooke, Deryck. An Introduction to Der Ring des Nibelungen. Sir Georg Solti, dir. Wiener Philharmoniker. Decca 414 100-2 (2 CDs), 1995.

Richard Wagner. Der Ring des Nibelungen. The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by James Levine. New York: Deutsche Grammophon, 1990.

Richard Wagner. Der Ring des Nibelungen. The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by James Levine and Fabio Luisi. New York: Deutsche Grammophon, 2010-12.

Richard Wagner. Der Ring des Nibelungen. Sir Georg Solti, dir. Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and Vienna State Opera Choir. Decca 455 555-2 (15 CDs), 1959-68.

Consulted Sources

Byock, Jesse, translator. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1990.

Gayley, Charles Mills. *The Classic Myths in English Literature and in Art*. Based originally on Bulfinch's "Age of Fable" (1855). New York: Ginn and Company, 1911.

Hatto, A.T., translator. *The Nibelungenlied*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2004.

Lenrow, Elbert, translator and editor. *The Letters of Richard Wagner to Anton Pusinelli*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1932.

Newman, Ernest. *Wagner as Man and Artist*. New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1941.